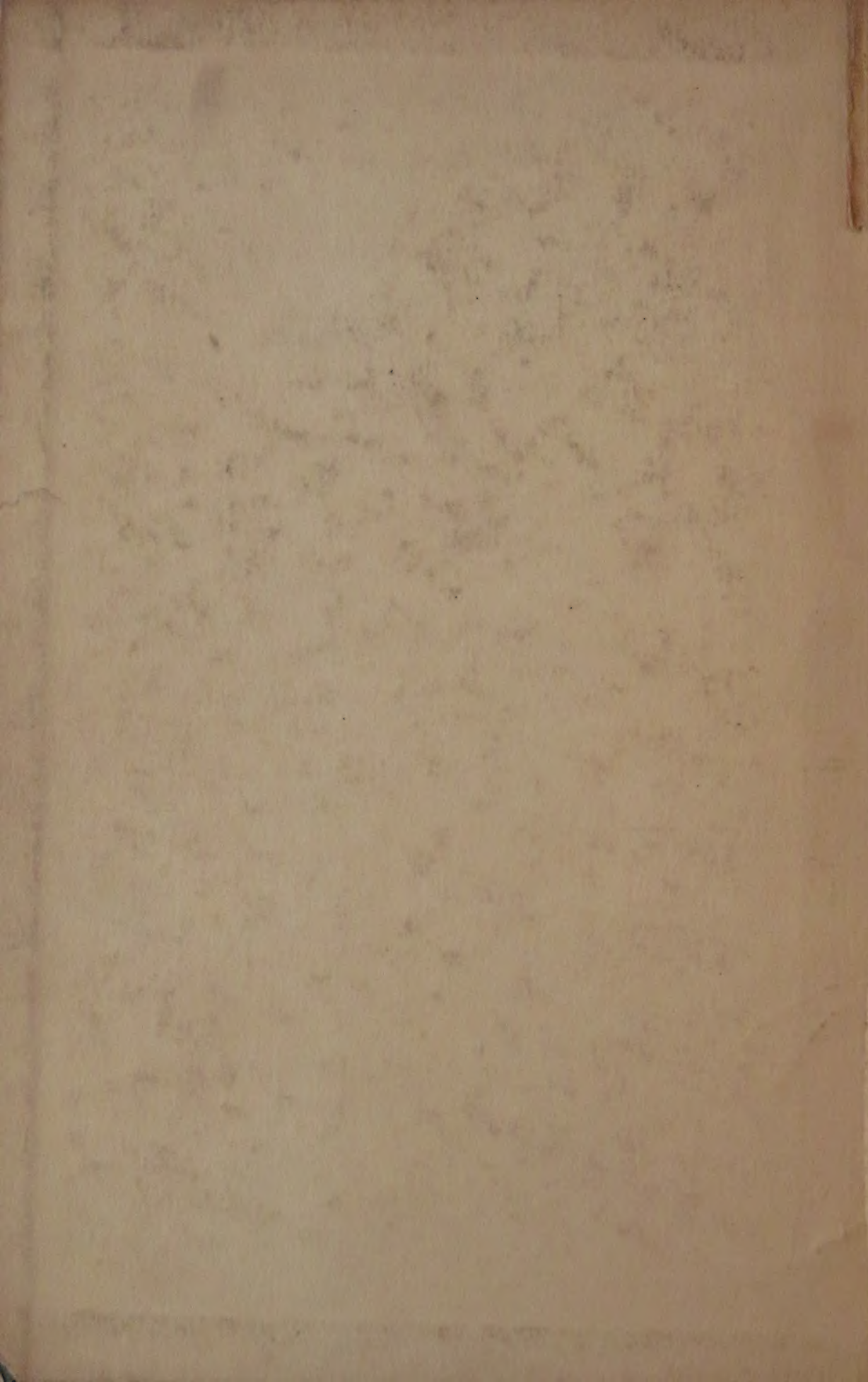
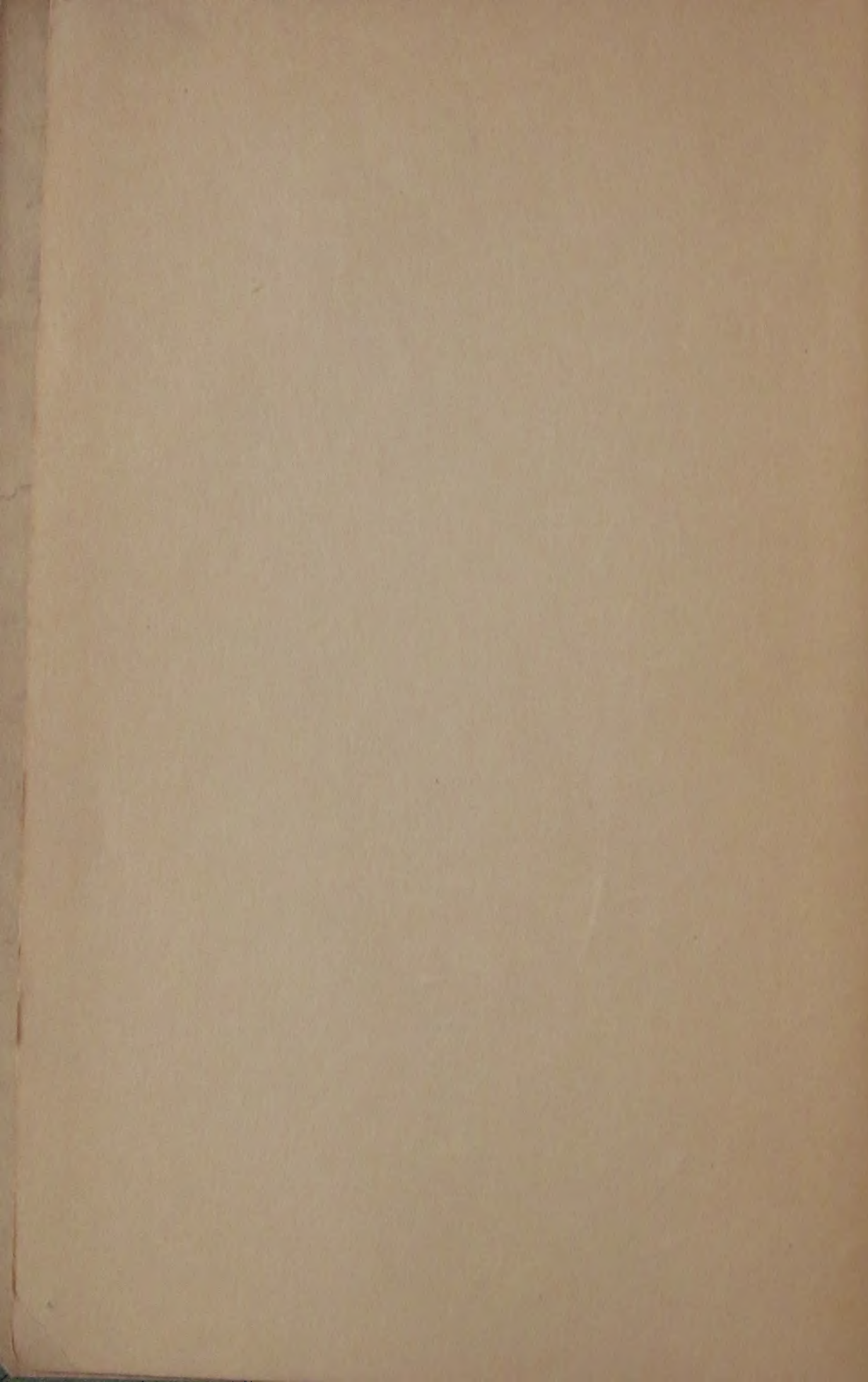
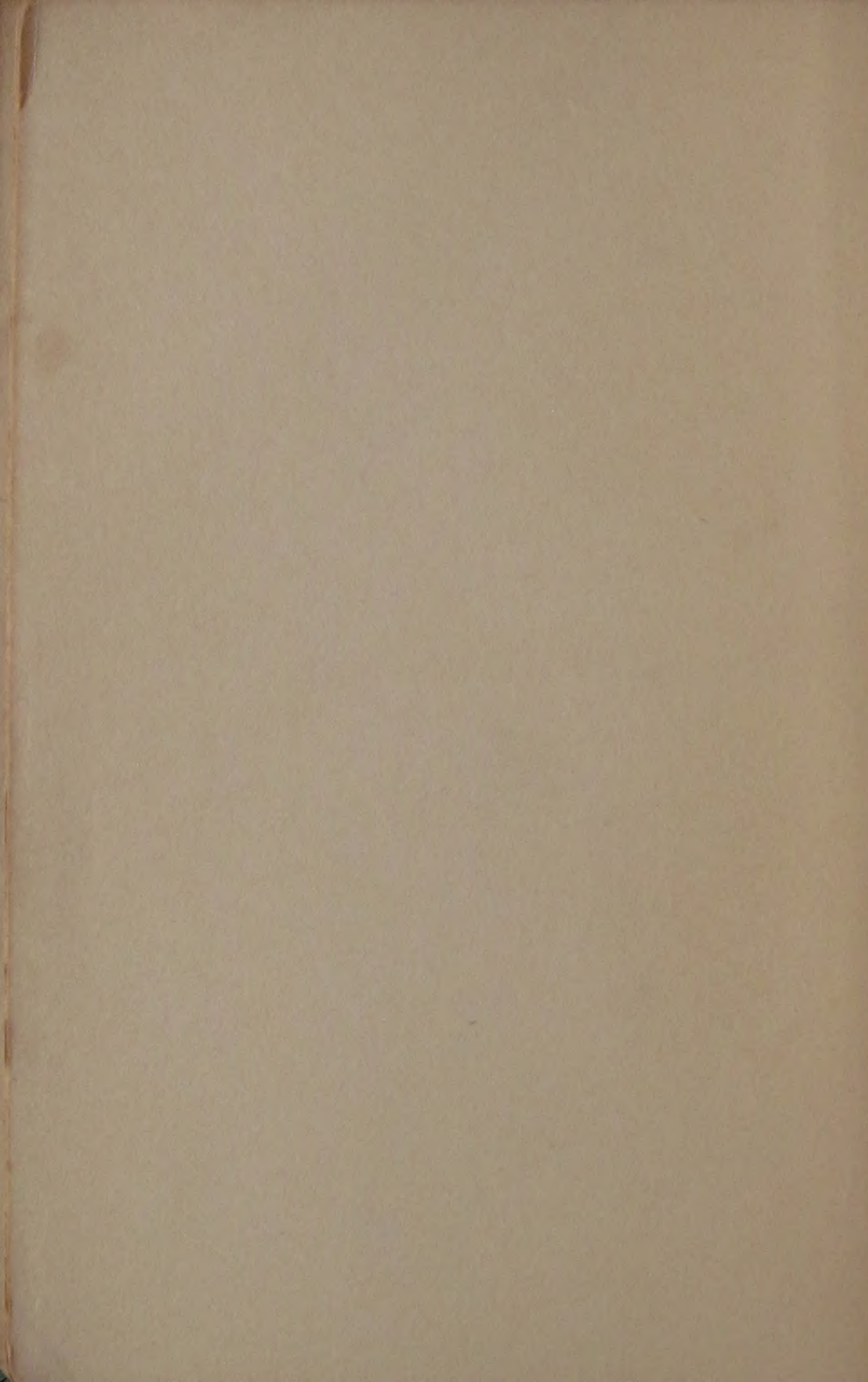


EMPTY SHRINES

ELISABETH
FINLEY
THOMAS







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EMPTY SHRINES

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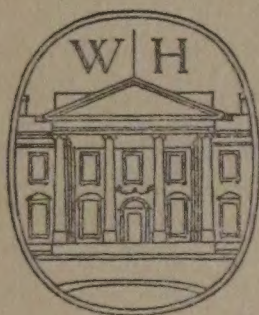
THE
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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

EMPTY SHRINES

By

ELISABETH FINLEY THOMAS

Author of Rendezvous



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EMPTY SHRINES



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CHAPTER I

THE first number of their act was over. The applause broke with a few straggling handclaps, swelled in the middle and frayed out, frazzled and thin, at the end.

Alberta and Victoria bowed and shook their curls. They were dressed in long-waisted muslin frocks of ultra-juvenile pattern. Sashes of an exaggerated childishness cut across the frilled whiteness of their flounced skirts. The dark ringlets on Alberta's head were tied back with a blue ribbon, a pink bow looped back the frizzly mop of Victoria's blonde hair. Except as to coloring the twins, to a superficial observer, would have appeared to be precisely alike. The seeing eye, however, might have detected a subtle difference in the two sisters, though it was scarcely more noticeable than the discrepancies between a fine original and a good copy, an exquisite drawing and a skilful tracing. Alberta's beauty was informed with the spirit which Victoria's lacked. One was a soul with a body, the other was a body with a soul.

The girls tipped their cheeks coyly against their plump shoulders. They were panting, for the number had been a clog. Tiny beads of perspiration pierced the grease paint on their foreheads and upper lips. The starched ruffles on Alberta's drawers had scratched one pink knee. How she hated the whole business! Her eyelashes, heavily beaded with mascara, and brushed upward and downward, gave to her eyes a starry innocence. Alberta hated mascara too. You felt as if you had winked into a tar barrel.

Through the fixed professional smile on Alberta's lips, the smile that held in place the dimple in her left cheek (Victoria's dimple was in her right cheek), Alberta managed to mutter, after the manner of a ventriloquist, that their dance was a "flop." Victoria answered with a scarcely perceptible shrug of indifference as she turned back to the piano, where she was to accompany her sister in the next number. Alberta, who had skipped toward the wings to receive a violin from off-stage, now began to play, whirling slowly to her own music. That was better. Alberta liked to feel the satin smoothness of the violin against her cheek. She confided, and it answered. The audience, out there across the footlights, seemed impersonal; the auditorium looked like a big black velvet curtain, spotted with the dazzling white ovals of faces. If only

Victoria would not play so fast! Of course Alberta knew *why* she was doing it. Victoria was vexed because Bert Barstow, the acrobatic comedian, had been "saying it" to Alberta "with marshmallows" all the week. For some reason Victoria looked upon him preemptively, though he had an amusing and inclusive jocularity that didn't specialize much. Victoria lacked professional honor or she wouldn't have forced the tempo out of pique. Granny would be annoyed. Alberta could see her wigwagging her disapproval from the wings, but it did no good. To save the situation she herself speeded up, dancing a little wildly. If Victoria refused to carry the situation, she must and would.

This time a spontaneous wave of sound swept toward the stage. Granny came out from the wings. She always took the final curtain call with her granddaughters. Alberta thought she looked very nice, just the way a grandmother should look, in a brown silk dress, and old-fashioned bonnet, perched quaintly above the bandeaux of her aggressively dark transformation, and the management felt that she added a sentimental and picturesque interest to the two little vaudevillians, serving furthermore to emphasize their childishness.

Theirs was the last number. The audience, coughing, shuffling, dropping its programmes, made its way toward the exit.

"Hurry, Vic!" cried Alberta, giving her sister a little shove as they relaxed, back-stage, from the final skip. "It's one grand night, and I love the walk home when it's clear!"

"Me for a limousine every time if I had the price!"

"Ease up on the wait to-night, Granny!" urged Alberta, hopping over the circle of her starched petticoats, in the dressing-room. Granny always insisted that they cool off for ten minutes before going out. She was timing them now with her old-fashioned gold watch, the wedding gift of George Crabtree, a clown of marked originality, who under the professional name of Gogo had amused three generations.

Finally the girls were free to slip into their dresses, which Granny smoothed, poked and patted into order. Alberta had occasional misgivings about their woolen frocks of red and green tartan, with scarlet Red Riding Hood capes slung around their shoulders. People stared at them so. Victoria pulled her black velvet tam-o'-shanter to an angle of forty-five degrees. Their caps askew above their bobbing curls—with a "So long" to the doorman they passed gaily out into Seventh Avenue.

The cold clear night rushed to meet them, a clean wave, delicious and refreshing. They dived into it joyously.

"Aren't they cute?" said Alberta, looking up into the sky where an electric sign showed funny little stiff figures performing a daily dozen on behalf of Wrigley's Spearmint. She liked them even better than the lady fastening her garter to a new brand of indestructible hose, or than the twinkling kitten playing with an unwound spool.

"It reminds me of the illuminations at her Majesty's Jubilee," Granny, valiantly trailing her little town stars, made her invariable observation.

"I'll go crazy," grumbled Victoria, "if Granny hauls the Queen out of camphor balls one time more. We're alive here, or had ought to be if she'd let us."

Granny's reminiscences always maddened her.

"Mind the crossing, Granny," cautioned Alberta.

The clanging of the surface cars filled the pause as they navigated the traffic.

"The evening's just beginning for most girls," resumed Victoria when they were safe on the opposite sidewalk and Alberta had released Granny's elbow. "There was a man winking at me from Box B the whole time. His wife was with him too,—my, but she was sore! Wonder why married men should be supposed to wear blinders? I never get any fun," she added with no apparent sequence of ideas. "After all, we're not kids any longer at seventeen."

Alberta was silent. The first reviving shock of the fresh air was over and the worry that had haunted her all the evening had returned. She was trying to think things out. One week more would end their engagement on the Keith circuit. They had been playing Manhattan and adjacent suburbs for eight weeks. And she had felt with a crushing finality even before the management had failed to book them further that they could not go on indefinitely with what they now offered. They had outgrown their "act." It was no good talking to Vic. Granny didn't realize it, but it was only a question of time when they would be off Broadway altogether, shunted to precarious booking in the inferior houses of small towns. They did not look as much alike as they used to, either. Already there had been complaints from the management about it. It would be far better if they could develop differently, each in her own way. If she, for instance, could take "violin and vocal," study, become something. Her fiddle and the little song which she had added to-night on an impulse, had been the only part of the performance that had brought anything but a mockery of applause. Lessons were expensive, and yet she knew that without them she did not have enough solid technique to build upon. If there only were no such thing as money, or else, nothing *but* money!

"Do look at that lavalier," Victoria interrupted her sister's reflections, pulling her in the direction of a brightly lighted jeweler's window. "I wish——"

"Aren't those the two girls we saw at Keith's last week in that old-style act?" said a woman's voice behind them.

"The ones with the queer rented mother? Why, yes," laughed her companion. "The dark one has quite some personality," she added, "when you really look at her."

"Come on, Vic, I'm too tired for window-shopping," said Alberta harshly. She glanced hastily around. She did not want to have Granny hurt. But both the old lady and Victoria were evidently too intent on the jewelry display to overhear the chance conversation.

Alberta, less buoyant than before, fell into step lightly. The tone of the two women had not been reassuring. It coincided too well with her own convictions.

They had reached the corner of Carnegie Hall. The squares of light in the windows gave it the appearance of an irregularly illuminated checker-board.

"Sometimes I think I'll pose as a model, mornings," remarked Alberta, as they passed the entrance, "just for hands, you know. I do so want violin lessons! Paul Darcy has a friend, a portrait painter; he offered

to introduce me. It seems a lot of lady sitters won't bother to pose for their hands. He says that mine are like the *Mona Lisa's*—you know, the woman with the funny smile."

Victoria looked sharply at Alberta. Paul Darcy was a tenor who filled an occasional special engagement in vaudeville. He was just not good enough for grand opera in New York, although he had once sung a short season in Chicago. Some people still regarded him as a twenty-to-one shot. But he was in reality already to be counted among the "also rans."

"Since when has Darcy taken notice of you, I want to know?" asked Victoria. "Personally, I've no use for that upstage sort. I'm not like you anyway; I feel I'm appreciated where I am. Three fellows asked me out to supper this week. It's something to know that you could make a date if you were allowed out after curfew. You'd never think that Granny——"

A gust carried off the end of the sentence as they turned into Fifty-Seventh Street.

The west wind blew back the curls from their white foreheads. The lamps from the Y. M. C. A. shone on their rosy faces. Two young Christians, descending the steps, seemed to take an almost pagan interest in beauty. Granny Crabtree, ever watchful, glared them down. She felt she would be glad when she should

have safely shepherded her lambs across Ninth Avenue, where the closing doors of the Glenmoorland would shut out the dangers of the street.

And Granny Crabtree knew all about dangers. Fifty years ago, as Leading Boy in the Drury Lane Pantomime (her name had been Vivian Varley then), she had not been without experience. No girl had ever worn tights with more devastating effect to Eton and the Peerage. The diamond garter given her by the Duke of Taxminster would scarcely have clasped her fat rheumatic wrist to-day, if it had not disappeared long ago behind the iron grating of a famous pawnshop, opposite Victoria Station.

But, so contradictory is human nature, that at the very height of her success as Dick Whittington, the very season when one of the little royal princes, bless his 'cart, had leaned over the velvet rim of his box to question Dick personally as to the authenticity of the Cat, Vivian Varley's secret vice had been a taste for respectability.

As she had stood nightly, the knees of her perfectly symmetrical pink legs well locked, her hips jutting boldly from her tiny waist, and covered only with the shortest of green velvet trunks, her full high bosom billowing above the low-cut bodice, her cap jauntily atilt above her saucy cockney nose, no one could have

guessed that the ideal that she would have chosen to resemble was none other than the Princess of Wales.

“I don't want a girl from Birmingham
I've heard such a lot concerning 'em”

the voluptuous red lips had sung. To be a lady! That was her ambition. And she had meant to be, if only Taxminster had come through, made a duchess of her. She was going to learn, play up, become the real thing. But Taxminster hadn't come through. Instead he had gone to Africa to shoot lions, and on his return had taken up with a *Gaiety* girl who was almost scrawny, and Vivian's opposite in all respects.

After a while she had married Gogo, and had settled down. There had been a baby girl, named Alexandra, of course; but Alexandra had not inherited her mother's taste for conventionalities. She had run away at eighteen, without benefit of clergy, with a good-looking toreador who was doing a turn in the “Halls,” following a bad *cogida* in a bull-fight in Seville. Granny never saw her again. She died in child-birth in Madrid, and the following year Il Chiquito, who had quite lost his nerve and should never have returned to the ring, was killed in the act of fleeing before his fourth bull, hissed alike by Sole and Sombra.

After much correspondence the two babies had been brought to England at the expense of Miguel's Quadrillo, by a soft-hearted picador who, though he could listen with professional indifference to the ripping of a horse's belly, handled his charges with the tenderness of an old nurse and wept tears of regret upon giving them over to Granny Crabtree.

The girls had been beautiful babies; a foreign look about them added to their charm. As they grew older a certain refinement was discernible in their type, a look of race and pride that must have come from their Spanish blood. The names, Victoria and Alberta, didn't suit them very well, but Granny having insisted upon their rebaptism into Protestantism, thus made her tribute to the life of the great Queen and her blameless Consort. For convenience she added her own maiden name of Varley. The Crabtrees resolved to give the children all possible advantages. Miss Pring, a private governess, who was willing to come to the lodging in Bloomsbury for two and sixpence an hour, took charge of their early education. Granny herself started them "in piano," singing and dancing.

If Gogo had not fallen ill during his first season at the Hippodrome (his trip to the States was to have been the climax of his career), the twins might have been brought up as their grandparents had intended. Poor

Gogo, groaning in the throes of acute arthritis, embittered at missing the great opportunity of his life, two red spots of fever burning on his cheek-bones as brightly as the round disks of his clown's make-up had ever done, kept repeating in a sort of frenzied disappointment: "And us going to send the girls to Girton, and now it's the 'alls."

Alberta and Victoria were presently subjected to the efficient processes of the New York public schools, which so liberally dispense education without inducing cultivation, and during the three years of Gogo's martyrdom the Crabtrees spent more than they could afford, in fact all that they had saved, in giving the girls extra lessons in dancing, piano and violin. At least they could be equipped for a decent act, something dignified. After poor Gogo's death, when the doctor's bills were paid, there was very little money left—not enough to fulfill his wish that he might lie in the churchyard at Ilfracombe (he had been a Devonshire lad), amid the merriment of bobolink and linnet, akin to his own gay soul. A crowded section of Woodlawn, a very Tenement of the Dead, was all that they could afford, and Alberta and Victoria had presently to be started on the only career now possible to them. Of course there were the "movies," but Granny Crabtree's professional pride drew the line there. The Var-

leys and the Crabtrees were artists in their line, had talents, temperament, not just film faces and glycerine tears.

"The two little cuties will make a dandy team, Mrs. Crabtree," advised Izzy Einstein, ballet master at the Hippodrome. It was through him that they got a first engagement in small-time houses, where they worked up their act, until finally they made a hit that secured them two seasons in New York and its suburbs. It was only now that their popularity had begun to wane. Fortunately, during the eight or nine weeks that they could live in New York, while playing Broadway and the up-town houses, Newark and Brooklyn, they knew a nice decent place to lodge. Mrs. Withers, a pal of Granny, who had played Second Boy in England to Granny's First, had married a painter who came out to the States. After his death she remained established at the Glenmoorland in the assured decency of genuine widowhood, emphasized by black cashmere and much crêpe. Granny and the girls made their temporary home with her.

"It's a nice address to give the tradespeople," Granny often remarked.

CHAPTER II

THE Glenmoorland apartment-house represented the last outpost of respectability in a street which included all classes of society, many religious sects and most of the arts. The avenues established its social meridians, block by block.

First came the palaces of the big millionaires, windows on several sides, doors in the middle, opening grudgingly for exits and entrances; then the abodes of the less consecratedly fashionable, the more mutably solvent; after that, the rich *hoi polloi*, brewers with art collections; college professors who had married well; people in trades not approved by the smart set, such as patent medicines or retail businesses; farther over, flats, studios; a few high-stooped houses with the signs ROOMS TO LET; boarding and rooming-houses. The Glenmoorland was acknowledged to have a very special flavor of gentility. It was a huge brick building, hideous and square. The variegated display of a chemist's window broke its quadrangular shabbiness at one corner. Whenever the fire alarm sounded within a radius of ten blocks, people stuck their heads out of the window or remained seated at their several avocations,

according to their temperaments, only remarking with confident finality: "The Glenmoorland must be on fire." The Glenmoorland was always on fire; but it never burned.

To live in the Glenmoorland either implied that one had seen better days, or that one would see better days. Its windows gave both east and west, thus symbolizing Sunrise and Sunset.

An eccentric old gentleman with mildly Chesterfieldian manners, presided over the Glenmoorland as agent and superintendent. His wife had been a poetess of the school of Emily Dickinson. No one had ever detected Mr. Ransome superintending anything, except a pigeoncote for carrier pigeons, which he maintained on the roof in memory of a poem written by the deceased Lucy Ransome, about a carrier pigeon. Mr. Ransome gave tone to the house, however. He had known Richard Watson Gilder, and had held commerce with Richard Godkin of the *Evening Post*. He himself wrote occasional letters to the papers, signed "A Nature Lover," or "An Observer," and might be seen carefully pasting them, when published, into a tattered scrap-book in the office at the right of the entrance, when he should have been making out the monthly bills. The apartments were chiefly let out to artists and to authors. A few shabby, genteel tenants exercising

other professions, or who were merely *rentiers* in a small way, were looked upon as outsiders. To Mr. Ransome's way of thinking it was in no way damaging to the reputation to be unable to sign a check, but entirely disgraceful to make a false rhyme, or to split an infinitive. Adolphus Withers's degree of cultivation had been quite superior to that of his wife. His vocabulary had endeared him to Mr. Ransome, and in the parched evenings of the New York summers they had smoked many pipes of intellectual companionship near the dovecotes on the roof. He therefore felt most kindly toward the widowed Rosie, though her lack of syntax would otherwise have been quite sufficient to suggest his dispossessing her,—her double negatives alone, constituting, in his mind, an almost legal ground for eviction.

The privilege of subletting was included in the leases of the Glenmoorland, and Mrs. Withers rented her rooms singly to persons well recommended. Her success was marked by the fact that often every pane of glass in the apartment had a handkerchief drying on it, and that the milkman left six pint bottles daily in the hall. Two of her inmates took cream and subscribed to a daily newspaper. Mr. Ransome did not hold with a theatrical clientele, but Rosie had arranged for Granny and the girls by calling them art students.

"And so you are, my dears," she said in defense of her former profession.

The twins, when they were on tour, looked forward to a return to Mrs. Withers, for she had that gift most inestimable and most precious among all the gifts of women, the gift of giving comfort.

The west wind had swept strongly through the sapphire night as the girls and their grandmother bent to it, crossing the final avenue, and when the sleepy elevator boy opened the rattling outer door, the mingled odor of dust, moldy cellar and the Ethiopian skin seemed to Alberta rather cozy than otherwise. She anticipated Mrs. Withers's hospitality of cocoa and hot scones.

"They say the new Egyptian Café is lighted with blue torches. How I love a Welsh rarebit!" sighed Victoria, as they rose heavenward in the body at the imperceptible rate of locomotion at which most of us rise in the spirit.

"A telegram done come for Miss Varley. Reckon Mrs. Withers am nappin'. I done stuck it under de doo'," Theophilus informed them.

The two girls pounced on the envelope.

"Miss A. Varley.

"Can you pose hands for me to-morrow? 15A East

47. *Nine thirty. Urgent. Will double usual pay. Darcy recommended.*

"Carlion."

"Who is it from?" asked Granny in the agitated voice of one to whom trouble has come in all guises and at odd moments.

Alberta explained as they walked down the passage that connected the front part of the flat with the rear end, where Mrs. Withers had reserved for herself the dining-room and kitchen. The asthmatic snores of a columnist on a daily paper issued from the second bedroom. Victoria grabbed the telegram. She pinched Alberta as an indication of her impression that it was best not to impart its contents to Granny. Alberta, however, held an opposite view. Taking the telegram from Victoria's hand, she passed it quite simply over to Granny, who, fumbling for her glasses, held it at arm's length beneath the round bell light that hung over Mrs. Withers's table.

"Here, Vivi, I'll read it for you," cried the former Rosie Fitzgilbert, glad to emphasize the few years of her superior juvenility by deciphering it without spectacles.

"I protest," said Granny, when she had finished. She spoke with the dignity of a Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi.

Mrs. Withers drew her velveteen kimono around her. "You had ought to be more broad-mindedder than wot you are, Vivian Varley," she said. "This is not dear old Hingland, you knaow, much as we'd orl like it to be. In the States we 'ave to get out and 'ustle as you had ought to 'ave found out by this time. We knaow that you and I could 'ave been playin' Dick Whittington and Puss in Boots now, if we 'adn't gone off our 'eads about our two young men. 'But it's different here to what it was there,' to quote the old song. Mr. Carlion is a very fine gentleman, an Academician and the like. The Art Collaborators' Club recommends him as safe and sane from the model's point of view. His wife is president of it, and she must know. I advise lettin' Alberta do it. You could go with her yourself, for that matter. Just run out in the kitchen, Alberta 'n' Victoria, and take off the cocoa. 'Ow about a muffin, Vivi, and some cold shrimps? Or are you afraid you might dream Taxminster was 'awling you about by the back 'air like in the good old British days you are so keen on? Remember you can't do much about the girls' future. 'When you can't stand the champagne, don't interfere with a chap buyin' his own ale,' Withers used to say. You got to let the girls work life out for themselves. There's not a boy or a girl, or ever was, that would take even one slice off our loaf of experience.

They think it is stale, they bake for themselves. Say Alberta poses three times a week when the Colonial bookin's are over, there's a good two pound, or three pound five for violin lessons. It may be weeks before the agents find any more time on the circuit. 'Ow about a little 'ot toddy?"

Granny Crabtree, mellowing under the influence of warm whisky and water and the arguments of Rosie, finally relented to the extent of promising to take Alberta to Carlion's studio to talk over the sittings the next morning.

"Well, good night, girls!" Mrs. Withers's full cheek against their faces felt like a hard round apple as she kissed them good night. She stood in the passage, a fat goddess of liberty, an arm aloft, ready to turn down the single gas-jet to the minimum of waste against the return of a newspaper man who came in the latest of all her lodgers. Granny and the girls made their way through the narrow hall toward their room at the front of the flat. This year they had been particularly fortunate, for they had occupied the parlor. Its permanent lessee, a miniaturist who had undergone an operation for cataract, was recuperating in the country.

"Miss Stippler is quite the lady," said Mrs. Withers when she had first ushered them into these superior quarters, "*and—artistic.*"

A dull green paper of a solid tone covered the walls. On the shelf of the ugly red wood mantelpiece, built like an old-fashioned étagère, stood a cast of the *Flying Victory*. There was a print in color of Watts's *Hope* between the windows. Over the couch hung a long lithograph by Maxfield Parrish, representing a boy on a marble terrace with a turquoise blue sea in the background. A Bagdad curtain, a little torn, covered the couch. But it was of a hypocritical piece of furniture that resembled the offspring of an upright piano and a sideboard that Mrs. Withers was especially proud.

"That folding bed is top 'ole," she had announced. "The girls will 'ave their beauty sleep. If you just tie one of the legs to the marble table there'll be no danger of its shuttin' up on them. It's best to be on the safe side, I say always. I dare say it's me British blood!"

Alberta hated the folding bed. She was ashamed of it as untrue, and therefore despicable. Moreover, it had a lump in it which had to be avoided. You could manage by curling yourself around it, but that got you too near the edge on one side. The space on the other was wider. But Victoria occupied that slope of the mountain and would not take turns. Nevertheless the two sisters usually slept soundly enough. To-night, however, Alberta lay awake for fully half an hour. It was not altogether of her future as a potential violinist

that she was thinking. The tall figure of Paul Darcy, the clean-cut face with its romantic pallor and its wavy dark hair, kept cutting across the train of her thoughts. It had been nice of him to speak to his friend about her. She wondered if she would see him again. His special engagement as a featured headliner had finished that evening. It was wonderful to meet people like that—gentlemen, that called you Miss Varley, not Kid, like Bert Barstow. Once she had seen him kiss Signorita Petrazzi's hand, in quite the European style. How very grand that must make a person feel!

Petrazzi—violin—the lump—Darcy—or was it cocoa—or Auntie Withers turning off a star? She did not know, for she was already asleep.

CHAPTER III

CARLION'S studio in Forty-Seventh Street had originally been an Irvingite Church, but the followers of the celebrated and unsuccessful rival of Thomas Carlyle in the affections of Jane Welsh had proved too few in number and too faint in spirit, to keep their place of worship free of mortgages. It had been about to pass into the hands of a receiver when Carlion, seizing the opportunity for a good purchase, had bought and transformed the building for his own uses. As a matter of fact after its acquisition he had done very little to it except to remove the steeple, in which the adjacent rumblings of Park Avenue had opened a transversal crack. A French couple (Carlion was very French, having been a *Prix de Rome*) pulled a "cordon" to open the big portal. Between the Gothic arches of the interior were hung huge tapestries to veil the too numerous side windows, the one in the chancel serving for the main lighting. In the gallery which ran around three sides, Carlion stored his unsold canvases. And Carlion could afford the luxury of unsold canvases.

Ten years ago he had married the widow of an oil

king. Some of his fellow artists attributed to his marriage the fact that he had never quite become the painter he should have been. But they were wrong. The widow's cruze of oil had certainly not caused his light to shine before men, but Carlion's was really the tragedy of many an artist—the tragedy of the *not quite enough*. In almost every man in his youth there is one picture, one book, one poem, one song. They are the first cry of reaction to the impact of life. After that comes the test as to whether the man is really an artist or only a startled human being.

In Carlion's case that first cry had been the magnificent portrait of Olga Sacanovitch, the Russian 'cellist to whom he had remained happily unmarried in Paris for many years. It has received the *Médaille d'Or*, the *Médaille d'Argent*, a "*hors concours*," and finally a "*mentionné antérieurement*," the picture of his lovely mistress constituting one of those infallible prize winners with which many an artist begins his career. And his liaison was almost as much consecrated by custom. In the portrait Olga Sacanovitch was represented seated at her 'cello turning half away from it in the fire, perhaps, of improvisation. The billowing lines of her long velvet dress swept the floor. The strange white face, brows drawn darkly over deep-set eyes, seemed to look out beyond the spectator. The mouth

was suave, softly fleshly, fading out without indentations at the corners.

Carlion's masterpiece hung aloft in the gallery, covered by a curtain of dull damask. Once in a great while Carlion went up to the gallery and lifted the curtain. Whenever he did so, he invariably remained in the studio all night and drank a whole bottle of whisky, neat.

Olga Sacanovitch and Carlion's real self were buried in the little cemetery at Passy near the grave of Marie Bashkirtseff.

The picture of Carlion's which was most appreciated by the public, however, was his portrait of Susan Duncombe, painted just before he married her. It had been a period in which emotion was not yet dead in him. The repercussion was still there, the last echo of the great music. It rather annoyed him to have this early painting admired more than his present work, and he had had it removed to his wife's drawing-room where comparisons could be instituted only with the original.

And the original was not the type of woman whose beauty suffers the most tragically from the ravages of advancing years. Susan Carlion's bones were indestructibly well proportioned. Age seemed only to cut away and refine. At forty she was extremely distinguished. At thirty, when he had married her, she

had been only rather wooden and rawboned. He had occasionally visited the salon of Mrs. Dunscombe in the Avenue Henri Martin,—when Olga Sacanovitch was on tour, he was always at loose ends. Olga's death having shattered him, body and soul, Mrs. Dunscombe had been at considerable pains to pick up the pieces. By dint of persistent attention, she finally patched him up into the simulacrum of the sort of celebrity suitable for a husband. She dusted him off (he had grown rather slack in the Rue du Val de Grâce) and married him; her devotion to the arts was well known. Having pasted him together so that the cracks showed very little, if at all—only he and she knew of them—she brought him to America whither her business interests forced a return from time to time. The great upheaval of the war had prolonged their stay, until it had seemed best to her to establish themselves definitely in New York.

Susan's plans were only slightly affected by the consideration of her son James Dunscombe's education and future. His financial situation would be underwritten in millions. His mother, like many rather plain women, liked beauty in men. Carlion had been a romantic-looking devil. Even now the least discriminating glance recognized him as somebody. But James Dunscombe was singularly unattractive. At seventeen his

long neck, set on over broad shoulders, his shambling gait, his full eyes whose absent gaze gave an impression of vacuity, made him almost repulsive to his mother. It is the most universal of fallacies that all women are maternal. Susan had wondered in her early motherhood at her absence of feeling for her baby. She had replaced it by a punctilious attention to a letter from which she knew the spirit to be completely absent. But her attentions to her son were vicarious. Arguing that this was an age of specialists, she provided the highest priced experts from his first nurse to his latest head master. Only one of these specialists had ever loved James. None of the others had known him, for love is the only really powerful lens with which to study any part of a human soul that is worth studying. But the original tragedy for James was the fact that his mother's life should happen to be conjugated with the verb "to appear." She had not the flair, the scent, that detects abilities or qualities not at first apparent. Quite unable to pick up a trail, she needed obvious sign-posts at every uncertain turning.

The young tutor who had discovered something unusual in James had been an outsider, the sort of fellow that older people called a "queer Dick" and his representations to Susan that Jim might be a genius in embryo, made little impression. One might as well as-

sume that every fat German was a potential Wagnerian singer, she reflected. For the rest, the only genius that would have appealed to Mrs. Carlion was the kind who could write erotic poetry suitable for tea-table discussion and wear a Byronic collar without exposing an Adam's apple. Preferably, however, she would have chosen, by way of variety, that her son should have been a blond giant, proficient in those sports most likely to land him in just the Long Island set nearest to the English peerage and affiliated closely with visiting British polo teams. Susan was forever talking of "mind," but in reality she was the most material of women.

Carlion had been ticketed for her before she found him and his name carried weight even in America, where artists could not be knighted or decorated by King or State. She felt that he had to a certain extent, made good, for after his establishment in New York, he had rapidly become a fashionable portrait painter. His natural and almost uncanny gift for likeness, all that intrinsically remained of his reputed talent, was responsible for this result. He saw his people nowadays as the average man and woman saw them. He did not attempt to psychoanalyze chromatically, perhaps because he was no longer very much interested. Genius is a hardy growth weathering chill or drought, inde-

pendent of soil, but Carlion's gift was only exceptional talent and it suffered in the frosty air of Susan's presence. He worked, however, conscientiously five or six hours a day and equally conscientiously bought with the proceeds of every second picture an example of the real art of some struggling confrère. It was a tribute to his inalienable personal attraction that although he was so evidently married, his clientele was made up of women of fashion.

For the rest, the Carlion ménage was balanced neatly on two social pinnacles; the eminent worldlings, Susan's friends, posed for Carlion, and the artistic celebrities who were Carlion's, frequented Susan's salon. There all bests met on a parity. Of course there were a few second bests, understudies and figurants who foregathered around her sparkling table at five, where, dressed in an exquisite white tea-gown, she sat enthroned against the pale panelings of her walls. The calla lilies in tall silver vases flanked her at just the proper distance in the background. Susan was the type of woman who fades rather than swells. Time would inevitably erase but it would never caricature.

A potent reason for the "second bests" of Susan's salon was a certain frugality in her psychical composition. She realized the expense in upkeep, the overhead charges of an intellectual establishment such as she

maintained. She must be ready, if need be, to back an eminent playwright, to stand behind new movements for intellectualizing the theater; to found special prizes at the Society of American Artists or the National Academy; to pay a Metropolitan artist his full price for an evening musicale. But on the other hand there were plenty of impecunious near-geniuses whose tails could be sprinkled with the salt of mere promises instead of gold dust, hints that a leading impresario would listen to their music, or that she could get them portrait orders from some women she knew,—Carlion had more than he was able to accept. The free coin of these words was excellent currency that passed with the less experienced. Susan was careful not to let down the bars to dandruffy Bohemianism or to Jewry, except to such Hebrews as were forsworn to St. Thomas's. There were plenty of presentable young geniuses, handsome and personable, like Paul Darcy, who were flattered to have their social admission stamped with the name of Carlion. Not that Susan Carlion gave quite so definite a form to her sagacious reasoning, but it was none the less there, behind the elegant arras protectingly drawn across her subconscious mind. Paul Darcy had shown himself to be one of the best of Susan's fillers-in. Not that she in any sense approved the enrichment accruing from his occasional vaudeville

engagements, still they served the purpose of keeping him in New York where he could occasionally sing at her Sundays. It had been at one of her "afternoons" that Darcy had recommended Alberta to Carlion.

On the morning following his telegram to Miss Alberta Varley, Carlion wondered as he set his palette whether the model would really turn up. The semi-circle of potentiality ranging through silver whites, cool emeralds, warm cobalts, flushed carmines and vermilions, earthy siennas, to final extinction in the blacks, tempted him this morning with something of its old promise.

Nine o'clock! The entrance bell, pealing like the tocsin, sounded energetically. Almost at once Madame Jobart lifted the enormous curtain that shut off the entrance: "*Des dames pour Monsieur!*"

A funny old woman, bewigged and artificial, yet quaintly discreet in clothes and manner, stood beneath it. Just behind her, and a little more in the shadow was a girl, absurdly dressed in a tartan skirt, a red cape and a black tam-o'-shanter. But the face below the tam-o'-shanter reached out to Carlion with a sort of piercing sweetness, like a high note in a minor key.

"Your telegram," the old woman was saying.

"Pray come in," said Carlion, advancing. "I was expecting, hoping you would come."

"For the hands, I understand," said the old woman a little hastily.

"Yes," said Carlion. "Mr. Darcy tells me Miss——"

"Miss Alberta Varley, of the Alberta-Victoria vaudeville team."

"Has very beautiful hands," completed Carlion.

The girl had drawn off her gloves, which were gauntleted and heavily stitched in yellow and red.

"Oh!" said Carlion with a sigh of pleasure.

Her hands hung like long lilies, suave and gentle.

"Miss Varley," continued the old woman, "is very anxious to earn more money for her violin studies, and we thought—I am her grandmother, Mrs. Crabtree. I am very particular about my granddaughters. Mr. Darcy assured me——"

Carlion smiled. He was amused that it should be Darcy, whom he privately guessed to be something of a rotter, who had vouched for him. He pulled forward a chair. "Pray make yourself comfortable, Mrs. Crabtree. Would you care to remain during the sitting?" He had divined the anxiety that made the brown taffeta crackle over Mrs. Crabtree's chest.

"Fingers are like the petals of flowers, they keep turning!" he went on, after Alberta was seated on the model stand. "I shall have to remind you if you are not accustomed to holding the pose."

The hour sped pleasantly. Carlion had acquired the habit of talking more or less to his sitters. Before the end of the morning, Granny found herself addressing him as Lord Carlion. She had known Leighton and Alma Tadema in the heyday of her affair with Taxminster, and they had represented more adequately her idea of what a duke should be, than Taxminster, with his taste for racing touts and jockeys, had ever done. Meanwhile Carlion had decided that he must paint a genre picture of this strange little Spanish cockney, who dressed in a tartan and was so oddly chaperoned.

Varley! Varley! Where had he heard that name before? Hadn't there been a *Gaiety* girl or a co-respondent—Marion? Violet? No.—Vivian Varley—that was the name. He had seen her when a boy in a Christmas pantomime. He ventured to mention it. Was it a relative? Granny did not answer for a moment. Instead she broke out suddenly in a quavering voice:

“If I should plant a tiny seed of love
In the garden of your heart, why, of course——”

After that she sang:

“I don't want a girl from Birmingham——”

They were old friends after that.

"And you *will* let this granddaughter of yours pose for my *Secret Door*? I have the idea already. You must, you know. In black—à l'*Espagnole*—with a deep shadow against the pale green door of a walled garden, listening. Ah, it is a long time since I have painted genre."

It was agreed before they left that Alberta should come every day the following week to pose for Carlion.

CHAPTER IV

“HE WAS quite the gentleman—genteel, you know, not dangerous, either,” said Granny. They were talking over Carlion on their return to the Glenmoorland.

“What do you call the dangerous age for a man anyhow?” asked Victoria, looking up from fudge and Hall Caine.

“From one to one hundred and one, and don’t you forget it,” Mrs. Withers was cynically emphatic.

“Come and see him for yourself, Vic,” suggested Alberta.

“Not while there are nut sundaes, skating and Bert Barstow,” replied Victoria. “He’s teaching me a new act, mornings, you know. You as good as told me, Alberta, that we’d outgrown each other. So I’m thinking about *my* future also.”

“Don’t let me ever hear you even suggest that you’d make up a team with that little drug-ridden bounder, Victoria,” said Granny vehemently.

“That wouldn’t hurt my professional pride—not more than being a model like Alberta,” retorted Victoria.

"When you stop cheeking your grandmother," interrupted Mrs. Withers, "there's 'am and eggs and kippered 'erring on the table for lunch, and you've no more than time. It takes five and twenty minutes in the subway to get up to the Concourse Vaudeville House."

The engagement of the Alberta-Victoria team at the Concourse Vaudeville House was the last of their New York engagements. The agents, whom Granny now visited daily, did not seem to think there would be any time open just then on any of the Orpheum circuits, but they held out hope for the South—Caledonia, Southern Pines, Jacksonville. Alberta had plenty of leisure to pose. She longed to study in the way she wished, and she confided her ambitions to Carlion, who told her stories of some of Olga Sacanovitch's early struggles, and suggested that he increase her pay.

"You are worth it, you know. You always swing into just the right line and become what I want you to become, in the picture."

But Alberta refused. "I can't do that, Mr. Carlion. But I'll give you all the time you'll take."

So Alberta and Carlion collaborated in real sympathy on a picture that he felt would rehabilitate him in his own estimation. Once when he was troubled about the shadow on the wall, she said: "It isn't big enough. Shadow is the whole mystery of Spain!"

"I'm really indebted to you," remarked Carlion, thanking Darcy. "I've never had a model that could touch her for intelligence."

He hated the idea of her southern engagement.

Alberta had hoped that she would see Darcy again, and finally he came one day late in the afternoon, with Susan Carlion. It appeared that they were arranging a concert in the studio for the benefit of the Art Collaborators. He was to sing for them. Alberta thought him more magnificent than ever as he stood by the huge black piano with the very long concert tail, while Mrs. Carlion planned at what angle he should face the audience. He only nodded to Alberta casually and devoted himself to Mrs. Carlion, shoving things about for her.

Alberta admired Mrs. Carlion immensely. She came up to every requirement in her conception of a lady. Her apologies to her husband for the interruption were as graceful as if he had been a stranger. Alberta thought this very beautiful. Most of the married people she had known seemed to consider that one of the chief advantages of matrimony, was the right to be either rude or indifferent. Carlion was equally polite in his replies. They exchanged exquisite courtesies as if their words were Venetian glass, that would break unless handled carefully.

Susan wore a long cloak of fine caracal with a soft chinchilla collar. Her slightly gray hair was hidden under a small close hat. A high nose and a rather pointed chin gave her an air of extreme refinement. She stopped on the way out and spoke to Alberta, saying that her husband had talked of her and that he must bring her home to lunch with him some day; she liked to know every one who was helpful to him. She dismissed Darcy with equal grace, adding that she was sure he wanted to stay and smoke a cigarette with Carlion and try the tone of the piano. Alberta thrilled with the ambition to become just like Mrs. Carlion. She was sure Granny would agree with her. When she was a famous violinist she would buy a caracal coat. It discouraged her to think that the degree of perfection in Mrs. Carlion's manner would not be purchasable. That was a gift of Gods and Ancestors.

Darcy, meanwhile, had thrown himself into one of the big Spanish chairs with the dark red tassels. Against the velvet, his pale face, a little hard with the tremendous cleft in the chin and two queer long perpendicular lines almost like wrinkles in his lean cheeks, was quite magnificent, Alberta thought. The skin, dark about his eyes, gave him an air of mystery. She could see that even Carlion was impressed by his appearance. She did not guess that in Carlion's mind was passing a

speculation as to just what it was that made that fellow look like such a bounder after all. It might be the white buckskin shoes, or the elaborate inner waistcoat, but it was really neither of these. It was something in his face. Perhaps the upper lip was a bit too long and stiff, or the nose not quite in the proper relief and too short. No, it was more subtle still—an emanation of personality, not explicable or definable. That he was well educated, Carlion knew, had gone to Oxford. Had not Susan said he was a “younger son”?

Alberta was resting between poses. He shoved the cigarettes toward Darcy and offered him a whisky and soda, or would he prefer tea? Madame Jobart would have it ready in a minute. Darcy preferred tea, and Alberta munched a brioche with the appetite of youth. Still sipping his Orange Pekoe and standing behind Carlion, Darcy kept looking at her when she had resumed her pose as if he had never seen her before. His eyes followed the lines of her figure, moving boldly from the curve of her shoulder downward to the high arch of her instep in the black satin shoe.

“*‘Avez vous vu dans Barcelone?’*” he remarked to Carlion, who made no comment. Alberta knew enough French to understand the question, but had never heard of De Musset, and the context. The conversation rather lagged between him and Carlion, and presently he left.

When she came out into the street after her change into the tartan and the tam-o'-shanter, she was astonished to find him waiting at the corner.

"You're far too pretty to be out after dark, you know. Especially in these Mardi Gras clothes your granny has you wear. You were exquisite as la Marquesa d'Amagui." He took her by the elbow. A pungent odor of cigarette smoke and something that might have been perfume from his handkerchief made her rather giddy. She tingled with an excitement that was only half happy. Her clothes must be wrong, she thought, self-consciously. It was nice of him not to be ashamed of her. There were things she wanted to ask him too. He had helped her already. This was an opportunity. She finally got up courage to ask him about violin lessons. Even a few more might help. She had time in the evening now. "I'll be glad to be of service," he said. "I shall be here a few weeks longer, then I am off on a concert tour of the Southern States. Lord has booked me right through to Tampa."

"*We* may go south too," said Alberta. "I am terribly worried about our act. Vic won't reach out for anything new, and the public is fed up with the kind of stuff we are trying to put over. Bert Barstow is teaching her trick skating, but she couldn't make good on that without a man as side-partner." Alberta

sighed. "If I were only good enough with the violin or vocal, she could accompany me fine and dandy all right, but I'm not. And it takes such a God awful—I mean such a lot of time and money to get anywhere."

A few days later Darcy had found a violin teacher who would give Alberta lessons at three-fifty an hour—"special price for the profesh," he told her.

She practised early and late, and when some of Mrs. Withers's tenants objected, Mr. Ransome came to her assistance by suggesting that she use the dovecote on the roof. There, near the clouds and the stars, sunrise and moonrise, Alberta swayed over her violin, companioned by the pigeons. One of them, very soft and lustrous, tamed by the gentleness of Mr. Ransome, sometimes came and lighted on her head as she played. Mr. Ransome often constituted her audience. He really was something of a bird charmer, and presently he taught Alberta his magic.

"It's loving them, really," he said. "And feeling that we're all alike—humans, animals, birds—just part of the one great scheme." Soon the doves came to her, followed her as they did Mr. Ransome.

One day, to her surprise, Darcy came to see her.

"Theophilus said I'd find you here on the roof," he said, emerging from the scuttle.

The pigeons fluttered away, and Mr. Ransome

looked at him more concentratedly than was usual for his vague gaze. Darcy laughed about her funny companions as they went down the stairs. But Alberta remonstrated. "I love Mr. Ransome."

"What a waste," he said, "when you *should* love me." It would almost have sounded as if he meant it, if he had not followed up the remark with the latest joke of flippant Broadway.

"Is your granny home?" he asked. "I must make up to the old lady. I'm usually the rage, the *coqucluche* of women over fifty, but I always feel that Puss in Boots—or was it Dick Whittington—doesn't like me. My manly vanity is offended. I desire her scalp, jet bonnet and all. Can't I drink a dish of tea with the family?"

Granny was mending a stocking when they went in. She had the heel stretched over an egg-like arrangement of blue glass, with a sort of handle to it. Her needle wove in and out expertly as she hummed "*I don't want a——*" She broke off and scurried hurriedly across the room to hide a pair of pink silk corsets that protruded from behind a sofa cushion, before she welcomed Darcy. Meanwhile she signaled Victoria, who was drying her hair in the sunlit window, to leave the room. Victoria wore no dressing jacket, a rough towel was pinned about her bare shoulders, but she didn't

seem to mind. She fluffed out her shining mane like a Lorelei. Alberta blushed. How grubby Darcy would think them! Victoria tipped back on two legs of her chair, rocking back and forth contentedly, oblivious of Granny's frowning pantomime. Her belt was hung over the *Flying Victory*, a paper of hairpins lay on the window-sill, her brush was in the middle of the mantel-piece.

"We are quite en fameel, tho' we're shabby genteel," she laughed, cocking her nose saucily.

"However, as I see it's 'take your hat, don't let me hurry you,' I'll go use the hired steam heat in the dining-room instead of God's free sun and air." She collected her bottle of shampoo, stuck the hairpins in her mouth and walked out. Granny apologized.

"I never know which of your granddaughters is the more charming," Darcy said. "But it is to you to whom I came to pay my respects to-day."

Granny was very like the rest of the seraglio.

"Very proper and attentive of Mr. Darcy, I call it," she said when he had gone. "I wish I'd had time to tidy up a bit before he came, and that Victoria had behaved more ladylike."

Carlion and Alberta had worked one morning up to the very last minute. "This," said Carlion, "is the

time to profit by my wife's invitation that I should take you home to lunch—the more so as her cousin, a famous bibliophile (what was a bibliophile, Alberta wondered), has elected to bring in a rare edition for me to admire in about two minutes from now. By making him go along with us we will save time, and be spared the history of printing from its inception down to the present day. Oh why," cried Carlion, "burden the mind by non-essential facts? Facts should be forgotten and replaced by ideas. After all, one can go to a library for reference. Aside from this devastating fad Tom Andrews is a delightful fellow with a sense of humor about everything except in folios."

Mr. Andrews, who did not look at all like a bibliophile, at first protested that he had an engagement at the Century Club. But finally he yielded with a glance of admiration at Alberta.

The magnificent mansion on lower Park Avenue, inhabited by the Carlions, was of white limestone. Its façade had a flat unaccented appearance, like a face without eyebrows, due to lack of cornices or other projections. And its simplicity protested against the vulgarity of the ornate dwellings on either side. It had cost more than any house on the block, but it concealed the fact with self-conscious dignity, just as Susan, over-solvent, invariably refrained from the mention of

money. Two very rigid little bay trees sentineled the entrance.

Alberta was disappointed in the footman. He was not in powder and smallclothes like the ones Granny said had looked so magnificent as ushers at Drury Lane. He removed the gentlemen's coats, rather grudgingly divesting Alberta of her cape when told to do so somewhat sharply by Carlion, and coughed deprecatingly when she handed over her tam-o'-shanter with the gentlemen's hats. Alberta only discovered that she had been wrong when Susan, hatted, met them at the top of the curved staircase which Alberta had mounted feeling sure that there must be a hole in the back of her stocking that the footman would be certain to notice.

"How charming of you, Tom." Susan extended her hand to her cousin. "This is nice to see you here," she turned to Alberta as she slipped her arm through Carlion's. "Luncheon is quite ready."

Carlion pulled his coat cuff over a streak of emerald green that he had ineffectually smudged with turpentine. Susan had the unpleasant quality of making people feel untidy. With her usual polite indirectness she now turned to the butler: "See that Mr. Carlion's valet lays out a fresh shirt for him while we are at luncheon."

Alberta, who thought Susan attentive and consider-

ate, was surprised that Carlion looked annoyed. An expression of quizzical amusement passed over the thin features of Tom Andrews. The luncheon table was simple and beautiful. Alberta had never seen anything like it—all green glass, with a big bowl in which floated a single white rose. There seemed to be an extra place laid on Mrs. Carlion's left. Presently there came stumbling toward it a tall gangling boy of about Alberta's age.

"My son, James Dunscombe," said Susan. Andrews asked him a few kind questions about college and about his holidays, to which the boy answered in painfully stuttering monosyllables. He sat with his prominent eyes fixed unswervingly on Alberta. She would have laughed when he missed his mouth with the bouillon spoon and let the contents trickle into his collar if she had not at once felt the pathos of the unlovely lad. Besides, she herself was bewildered with the multiplicity of the table utensils.

"We've a short luncheon, just bouillon, a bird and salad. Carlion" (Susan called him by his surname as one who mentions a Whistler or a Sargent) "likes to get back to work early. Tell me how you passed the morning, dear." She turned to her husband, refusing the soufflé potatoes. The question was put daily but Susan never listened to the answer, although she always

looked intently across at him, with an appearance of intelligent interest and a fixed white-toothed sort of efficiency in her smile.

"Splendid," she said, in response to Carlion's reply that it had gone very well, thanks to little Miss Varley. "My day has been overcrowded," she went on brightly. "I had to fill the box at the Bagby, of course. It is really *infra dig* wilfully to allow spaces at a concert to which you've subscribed—don't you think so, Miss Varley?" politely including Miss Varley as a subscriber to Bagby. "Afterward I hurried over to the Art Collaborators. We're having a lot of trouble with the programme."

"What are the Art Collaborators, Susan—one of your new philanthropies?" asked her cousin.

"You don't mean to say you don't know the Art Collaborators!" exclaimed Susan. "You must subscribe at once, and so must Miss Varley. Only twenty-five dollars a year. It represents the *entente cordiale* between the artists and their models. The luncheons served in the clubrooms are remarkable, a choice of fish or hamburger steak, one green vegetable or stewed tomatoes, fifteen cents, cheese and coffee extra—wholesome and not fattening, and served on the most charming, painted tables. I often wish I could eat there myself."

"I should think you would, since you don't eat anything," said Mr. Andrews rather ambiguously.

"The Art Collaborators," continued Mrs. Carlion, "also exercise a sort of censorship against mere physical beauty in models, thus assisting the artist. Character is admittedly what art most needs nowadays. Look at Matisse or Picasso, or back at Franz Hals and Rembrandt, even Teniers! That was a splendid type of woman."

"I suppose the board is composed chiefly of artists' wives," remarked Andrews dryly.

"Young women like Miss Varley," Susan disregarded him, intent on her idea, "strangers in New York, find it a delightful meeting place—warm and cozy, though this winter we've had some trouble with the furnace. Still, they can always wear their fur coats, you know."

"Ah, you furnish fur coats with the hamburger steak, do you, Susan?" Mr. Andrews really seemed to be teasing Mrs. Carlion, Alberta thought.

"That is one reason we want to raise a few thousand with this concert," she went on without heeding him.

"That won't go very far toward buying chinchilla or sables, but of course they may be satisfied with Hudson seal," chuckled Andrews.

"How impossible you are, Tom. You know perfect-

ly well that I'm talking about the furnace," Susan broke out a little vexed.

"My dear, I do, and I hereby tender you my apologies, and a small check for two hundred dollars to be applied to the purchase of lamb chops during the winter months, instead of hamburger steaks."

"That's darling of you, Tom, you're always so quaint. Well, to go back to the concert, Conchita Rosalba promised to dance for us, and now her management refuses to allow her to appear. There is no time to get any one else in her place. Of course Darcy is our main attraction, but still——"

Alberta looked down into her plate. She was thinking how glad she would be to help this benevolent woman in her philanthropies if she were only "good enough." For the past week she had been working on her dance with violin, on the roof of the Glenmoorland. She called it the Dance of the Doves—*Las Palomas*. She and Mr. Ransome had trained four of the pigeons so that in a part of it where she laid her violin aside in the dance, one of them nestled in her arm while another perched on her shoulder. She had intended to dress the part, if she succeeded in developing it into an act, in the tender gray of a dove's feathers. The song she crooned as she danced was based on Lucy Ransome's poem:

"Beneath a feathered wing I tie my heart.
The homing dove knows home is where thou art.
Go, carrier pigeon, find my true love out——"

It was old-fashioned, didn't have pep. Still, sentimental songs often went big in vaudeville.

She was so busy thinking that she didn't listen to the conversation after that. The boy opposite stared at her through big glasses. The gold bands on his teeth obliged him to keep his mouth open a little. No one had spoken to him during luncheon.

They were passing the finger bowls with a lovely little green sprig floating in the water next a slice of lemon. The green sprig exhaled a perfume. Was it to eat, or to look at, Alberta wondered. She felt so grateful for her meal in these wonderful surroundings that she decided to venture a suggestion.

"Mrs. Carlion," she plunged, "I can dance and sing and play the violin a little. I am in vawdevil, you know. If you ask Mr. Darcy, perhaps he'll tell you. I'd love to help you out."

Susan looked at Alberta appraisingly. "How sweet of you," she answered. "Perhaps——"

"Miss Varley plays very well," interrupted Carlion. "She brought her fiddle to the studio one day. She would be a great attraction."

"I'm sure it must be enchanting," said Susan. "Of course I should have to propose it to the committee. We are meeting at tea time this afternoon. If Carlion can let you off half an hour earlier, you can come too. I will telephone to Darcy, and we can talk it over."

"Shall I phone for you, mother?" asked James.

Susan shuddered. "*Telephone*, James!" Her vowels were clear, her consonants beautifully sharp. "Don't be vulgar."

Alberta did not know in what way James had been "vulgar" until Susan enlightened her. "When will our schools devote the necessary attention to a gentleman's accent and vocabulary? Shall we have coffee in the drawing-room?"

But Carlion, who had been silent most of the time during lunch, said that he and Alberta had not time for coffee, and must hurry back to the studio. Alberta was rather sorry; she had never seen coffee served in the drawing-room. It was common to say "phone," and you did not eat the sprig in the finger bowl. Distracted by these reflections on social amenities, she did not pose so well as usual, and Carlion let her off at four.

The committee was already assembled when she was ushered into the drawing-room. Susan in her tea gown edition looked like a Greek priestess performing rites among the silver chalices of an altar.

She introduced a young man with a taste for inverted metaphor. The idea for this useful technique for a pose as a wit and philosopher had come to him when reading Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." But one couldn't help feeling that the rest of the quotation did not apply, and that there was considerably more that he needed to know. He fell rather below himself when some one having quoted, inaccurately and apropos of what Alberta couldn't imagine, "'Standing where the rivers meet'" he countered: "'Meeting where the rivers stand.'"

"Isn't it?" had been Susan's comment upon this bewildering profundity.

Darcy nodded a "Good afternoon, Miss Varley." Alberta always thought his public manners so strange. Why didn't he call her Alberta or "Pansy Face," as he did in private? He had walked home with her only yesterday. Probably it would be vulgar, like "phone." But it was so cold it hurt her. Alberta was presently asked to describe her dance. She executed a few steps of it, but without the pigeons it did not carry very well. She missed the impersonal barrier of the footlights, and she felt self-conscious and awkward.

"Of course, we can't pay you for it, my dear," said Mrs. Carlion. "You would not want that. It will be your contribution to this great work we are doing for

art. No doubt your appearance at our benefit will get you plenty of drawing-room engagements. I shall tell all my friends about you."

Alberta felt she had been rather a failure before the committee, though the young man with the genius for topsyturvy epigrams got her all tangled up in one as he followed her down the stairs.

She had crossed Madison Avenue when, standing on the corner waiting for the signal to open a passage through the traffic, Darcy caught up with her.

"It's worse than trying to cross the Red Sea," he laughed.

He must have been hurrying, for, even with his long stride, he was out of breath. Looking down at her, he took her arm.

The town in its veil of spangled gray had forgotten the hard commercialism of the day, and seemed ready for its night of romance and adventure.

"Phew," said Darcy; "let's forget the camp of the Philistines. How about a walk in the park, and dinner at the Casino? There's never any one there."

Alberta was thrilled. The great Darcy of the Chicago Opera Company was actually asking her to dine with him. She looked down at the tartan skirt.

"I wish I could have worn Mr. Carlion's Spanish costume. Shall I go home and change? I've got one

dress. It's blue, embroidered with tiny pink wreaths." Darcy said that he had no doubt that it was lovely, but it was the girl that counted.

"Anyhow, I must telephone Granny." She had remembered not to say "phone." She was learning to be worthy of these occasions. The clerk in the drug store of the Glenmoorland would send the message up-stairs, she knew. They stopped in at the nearest booth, and Darcy dropped the necessary nickel in the slot. When they came out they walked for a few blocks without speaking.

"How wonderful Mrs. Carlion is!" said Alberta, partly to make polite conversation, but also because she meant it. "So refined, and all."

Darcy laughed. "Yes, she's refined enough. The house reminds me of a cold storage plant. I'm always afraid I'll catch pneumonia in my artistic temperament. It's warmer out here."

"I'm afraid my new act didn't please them much," said Alberta.

"They haven't any imagination. Wait until they see you with the doves. How are you going to dress?"

Alberta explained that Mr. Ransome knew a gentleman who made batik, and that he was painting for her a velvet bodice of changing tones, like the breast of a pigeon.

"Madame Nadal on Forty-Sixth Street—she's a costumer who has worked for us before, a whole lot cheaper than the big ones—will make the dress. For the act down South there are going to be two pigeons—so's to keep up the team with Victoria."

"*'Deux pigeons s'aimaient d'amour tendre,'*" quoted Darcy.

"I wish I knew French," said Alberta. "I wish I was splendidly educated."

"Intuition is better than education," said Darcy, pulling his purple silk muffler up around his throat. "All a woman needs is that, and beauty."

They entered the park at the Fifty-Ninth Street entrance, opposite the big pile of the Vanderbilt mansion. Avoiding the bleak expanse of the Mall, Darcy steered Alberta through little by-paths to the restaurant, perched high and overlooking the lake. The room within was almost empty. One table was occupied by an elderly man in gray business clothes and a fat blonde woman who wore a diamond sunburst on a chest which needed no accentuation. Her hand, with the big marquise ring of turquoise and brilliants, lay on the coarse cloth and occasionally he reached over to squeeze it. An obsequious waiter suffering from flat foot conducted Darcy and Alberta to an opposite corner. Darcy ordered dinner without consulting Alberta. She

thought this particularly nice of him. A glance at the prices of the menu—"planked steak. . . \$4.00; asparagus. . . \$2.50"—had determined her to ask modestly for a chicken sandwich and ice-cream.

Darcy was very entertaining. He told her about his life in France and Italy, where he had studied. "I'm going back to Milan a little later. The American climate has played the deuce with my voice, but my old master Ceretti will set me up again. This southern tour will net me enough to take a year off. When I come back it will be the Metropolitan. That is, if any living tenor can break in where that gang holds the fort. They need me, of course. Magnano isn't what he was. It is simply a matter of getting an audition."

Alberta's pride at being Darcy's guest was momentarily increasing. She admired everything about him—the way his coat fitted, the signet ring on his little finger, the smartness of his soft shirt, the tie with its two tones of blue and gray. She liked the way his hair grew in points on his forehead—everything, even to the way he flicked the ash from the one cigarette he allowed himself after dinner—he was forever thinking of his throat. Her pansy eyes rested on him fascinated. She did not know whether she ought to rise first when it was all over, and it was time to go home, but he even took care of that difficulty.

He held her elbow rather closely as they walked down the broad Mall. It stretched empty before them like a huge dancing floor. Suddenly Alberta slipped her arm from his. Her clear high voice hummed like a violin string. She began a sort of slow rhythmic dance. Down the Mall she went, whirling like a silver leaf on the moonlit breeze. The queer incongruities of her dress were harmonized by the magic of light. She was for the moment the spirit of all men's dreams—the will-o'-the-wisp that flees before desire. And Darcy, who was not impetuous, ran after her. He caught her a bit violently and held her for a moment.

"Little Dryad," he found himself saying, his voice husky. He could feel her heart flutter. A policeman stepped from behind the statue of Sir Walter Scott.

"Hot stuff—vaudeville free gratis! But this don't happen to be the Keith-Albee Circuit! You had better cut it out, or you'll be run in for disorderly conduct!"

"Excuse us, Officer," said Darcy. "We thought it Arcady, but it's only Central Park."

"Booze?" queried the policeman from the next beat, meeting his comrade in arms a moment later.

"No, just a couple of nuts, I guess. But the little girl was a humdinger. Funny how they fall for them pale green guys that couldn't get a half Nelson or a head lock on a feller if they was to try."

Darcy's good night at the door of the Glenmoorland would have met with the approval of the most fastidious chaperon. Alberta, hoisted by Theophilus in the musty cage of the reluctant elevator, wondered why she felt cold and disappointed. Certainly she wanted Darcy's respect, to be treated like a lady—and yet——

Granny was waiting, of course, to hear all about it. "Begin at the beginning," she said. Alberta omitted nothing—there was nothing to omit. "Well," said Granny when she had finished, "all very nice and proper I call it and no great harm in a bit o' fun once in a way. Very well, then, I say, take your pleasure with a gentleman every time, but take it like a lady! Civil he is too, Mr. Darcy," she went on meditatively. "Not like Bert Barstow, always cheeking a person. Victoria is out with Bert now. He's off the bill—hurt his hand and couldn't do his act. They're taking in a show—he got some free passes."

It was late when Victoria came in. She looked flushed and excited. Granny, who had been dozing by the lamp, scolded her. "I don't approve of that young man, Victoria," she said. "'Owever, it's only a matter of to-day fortnight before we go, and he's not on our circuit. 'Ow was the play?"

Victoria was unexpectedly loquacious, relating the details of the evening with much brio, and throwing in

an imitation of Miss Barrymore as Juliet that made Granny shake with laughter. Alberta was already asleep in the folding bed, which jounced unpleasantly when Victoria slipped between the covers, but it was not the hammock-like quality of the wire mattress that awakened her. It was Victoria's whisper in her ear.

"Put your arms around me, Alberta. I've sort of got the heebiejeebies." Alberta complied sleepily, and entwined Victoria in the arabesque of a sisterly embrace. She slept too soundly to know that Victoria lay wide-eyed until morning.

"You know, Rosie," remarked Mrs. Crabtree to Mrs. Withers in the course of the next day, as they busily washed out the family lingerie in a mutual bath tub, "I shouldn't half mind seeing Alberta get off!"

"I suppose you mean you'd like Darcy to marry her," replied Rosie who did not deal in half tones. "Well, maybe he means business, but it's a long way from the tea-table to the altar and I wouldn't start breaking up the team yet."

CHAPTER V

CARLION'S picture of Alberta was finished in time to be exhibited just before the Benefit. Carlion had not taken a prize for a long time, and when the gold medal for the best "genre" in the show room was awarded him he felt something of his old thrill. It is a question if one ever becomes blasé toward success. Even those with whom it is a constant habit, detect a missing note from the general orchestration of praise with surprising quickness. Carlion had been dead for many years, quite dead to either pain or joy, a splendidly articulated automaton, his talents moving at the impulsion of his will, but somehow mysteriously this little Alberta had awakened him again to beauty and to feeling. He was grateful to her, as to a messenger from his lost gods, and on the day of her last pose he made her a present of three hundred dollars.

"Keep it for a ransom," he said, "a ransom from life. You'll need it some day, suddenly perhaps, to get away from things you hate."

The rehearsals for the benefit were daily in progress now in the studio. Mrs. Carlion sometimes asked

Alberta's advice for the dances which were to be executed by the Art Collaborators. Besides the committee a few friends were generally present, and James Dunscombe, who was home again, owing to a serious outbreak of infantile paralysis in the freshman class, invariably sat ignored and goggle-eyed, against a tapestry in the corner. Alberta, who was sorry for him, often went over to him and, perching on a high tabouret, talked to him. He was young, and looked so lonely and ugly, and none but old ladies seemed to speak to him. "Well, James, you're quite a young man now." "You look every day more like your father." And James would shuffle and blush, and stammer sulky replies, to which they did not half listen.

Alberta, maternal in her love for all weak things, felt more and more drawn to James, and would look broodingly down at him from her tall stool. And James presently responded to the touch of her sympathy. Gradually as he grew at ease, he began to speak with less difficulty.

"I am going to overcome this," he said one day, when his speech had tripped over a barricading *t*. "There is a whole lot I am going to overcome. Nobody knows it yet. Mother does not understand, she's never had time to understand. And there's a lot I am going to *do*," he repeated thoughtfully. "Science is what gets

me. I'm too short-sighted to be any good at athletics. Gosh, I'm sorry, too, but," he laughed, "I guess I am long-sighted *inside*. I see what wants doing and I am going after it. I used to flunk my exams in school because I'd have an idea I was working on, about a new germ or a theory on the glandular system. Say, would you stop to learn the dates of the battles of Napoleon with all Huxley to be read? I met Carrel once, mother had him at a tea. There was heaps I'd have liked to ask him, but mother sort of shooed me off and the women were all buzzing round him,—you know how it is."

"Are you going to be a doctor then?" asked Alberta.

"I'll say I am," answered Jim. "Poor mother is sick about it! She'd like to make a polo player of me,—you know the sort, hunting at Market Harbour-ough and on Long Island. Ye gods! Can you see me playing polo?"

"I think it's just fine to be a physician," said Alberta sympathetically. She liked the word *physician*. It sounded better than *doctor*, and she was always a little on tiptoe now, straining toward the rarified level of Mrs. Carlion.

"I wish mother agreed with you," groaned James. "Once when I was a kid I begged our family doctor to let me have an appendix as a specimen. It was in

a bottle in his office preserved in alcohol. I kept it for a long time and then mother's birthday came along. I always kind of adored mother from a distance. I'd spent all my money on a skull so I thought I'd give her what I valued most, a real appendix. I hated to part with it, too! Well, you can imagine the rest. It was pretty tough when she told Hortense, her maid, to throw the nasty thing away and scolded me for having low tastes!"

Susan, who had been occupied with a group on the other side of the room, floated toward them.

"I heard James telling you of his ambitions," she said. It was one of her peculiarities that she could listen to several conversations at the same time and keep the thread of her own. "No doubt he will change in time. I always class doctors with dentists; essential, unpleasant and not to be asked to dinner! Even now they are barely received in England. We will be ready for you to help us rehearse the final tableau in a moment, Miss Varley," she swept on.

Alberta looked after her.

"Your mother is so wonderful and refined and all—I suppose that's why——"

The sentence trailed off. She could not quite find an adequate explanation for the blight that Susan's passage had cast upon Jim. All his spontaneity had

gone; he had subsided into a shy awkward boy. It was as if she had switched off a light with her cool competent fingers.

"Don't you ever talk things over with Carlion?" she asked presently. "He always understands us." She did not notice that she used the plural pronoun. "I can just imagine how you feel, I do so want to improve every way, my playing and *me* too, especially since I have known you people, your mother, for instance. She's all finished and smooth. Even I, a dancer, somehow stumble over things when I'm with her."

"But, Alberta," cried James, "never, never change! Why—why should you? You're what it's all about," he ended lamely.

Alberta glanced toward him. The reflected light shone in his thick glasses and she could not see his eyes, but in the confused phrases she had detected an implied lyric.

"I do talk to Carlion sometimes," he went on. "I go and sit in the shadow of him. He's like a big rock, only the top is in the clouds."

"Come, Miss Varley!" called Susan's clear voice.

"I'll go on up to the laboratory I fixed up in my bathroom," said James. "Say, would you come up and see it sometime; would you?" He was full of eagerness.

"I'll be up in half an hour," answered Alberta readily.

"Mr. James's floor? Yes, miss, quite so, miss." The words were respectful, but the supercilious footman whom she had asked to show her the way winked knowingly at the second footman, whom he passed on the stairs.

"That's what comes o' takin' a young woman out of her class," he commented to Cook later.

The laboratory was full of retorts, glass-tubes, jars and mysterious-looking bottles.

"I'm afraid I'll be blown up or get turned some other color!" laughed Alberta from the threshold. James had apparently quite forgotten that she was coming. Standing near the window, he was gazing intently at a glass-tube held toward the light. His hair was much tousled and his fingers were stained.

"Grandpa Gogo once gave us a toy chemistry-box for Christmas," she said in explanation of her last remark. "We dyed everything in the lodgings including the cat! That's as much as I know about chemistry. Please explain!"

And the Othello in James responded to the Desdemona in Alberta. Every man must tell a woman of his voyages whether they be actual journeys into far

countries or expeditions toward the unattainable pot of gold at the end of the rainbow of the spirit. And Alberta followed him with sympathy if not with understanding, which is after all what the Othellos want of their Desdemonas, else they would only hold converse with their fellow explorers in the clubs.

It was twilight when they had finished.

The following day James was to go back to college, and that morning Alberta had stepped behind a curtain in the studio and was stooping to find in an old chest a prop for one of the dancers, when looking up she saw James beside her. As she raised her head a kiss, light, light as the fluff of a dandelion or the wing of a humming-bird, brushed her cheek.

"I've wanted to do it a long time," said James. He did not stutter; it was as if his hesitating speech had been somehow miraculously released. "Because I love you," he added.

Alberta put her hand against her cheek as if she were holding some fluttering little bird there that she could not quite let go, the kiss had been so gentle!

"Why, James," she said. "I don't think your mother—you mustn't——"

"Oh," said James, still speaking quite clearly. "I know. I don't expect you to love *me*—or anything

like that. It's just that I love you, now and a thousand years from now." He did not change the tense. He spoke as though love were eternal—all of a piece. "I've never had anything I could love. Now I have—that's all." He lifted the curtain and walked back into the studio. Alberta followed. She thought Mrs. Carlion glanced at her a little sharply. Had she seen? She had been kind, and Alberta was scrupulous, but she hoped her manner did not betray that poor little shuddering, fluttering kiss. Alberta felt only a tender pity for this awkward boy, so strangely an outsider in his mother's house.

The Benefit was a huge success. It had been finally decided to include Victoria in the Dove Dance. "Two makes it look more important," said Mrs. Carlion.

"Now I'm in society," Vic had said jokingly to Bert Barstow. "I'm reading up in a book of etiquette to see what to do in case some gentleman I don't know very well sends me a piece of jewelry. Does one write a note? Send a card? Or spit in his eye? Some multi-millionaire is sure to fall for me."

Bert laughed. He was not jealous; he knew he was hugging the rail.

"Go to it, kid," he said confidently.

And she went.

Mrs. Carlion very kindly sent tickets to Granny and Mrs. Withers. The seats were in the last row, but Mrs. Withers was so familiar with the backbones of the Social Register that she soon put Granny *au courant*.

"There's Peggy Sefridge—she's Mrs. Doubleway now. I found that out in *Married Maidens*—I always think that line seems so unfair to their husbands, not quite nice, you know!"

"The Misses Alberta and Victoria Varley!" announced the young man of the inverted epigrams. He almost said "Varley Alberta" from sheer habit. The girls floated out into the circle of the spotlight. Against a latticed background, blooming with artificial wistaria, hung a big wicker cage; the pigeons inside it fluttered and cooed. First Alberta danced alone to the music of her violin, her soft loveliness enhanced by the cool grays, the dim chiffons, her breast shimmering with greens and golds, touched with pink.

"*Las Palomas*," said the lady, looking through a jeweled lorgnette at the daintily engraved programme. "The white dove is the prettier, but the gray one has more personality."

The girls had now loosed the pigeons. Alberta held one of them beneath her chin, nestled like her violin.

The other perched on her outstretched arm. Victoria played the fiddle for Alberta's dance. She could get through a number very acceptably for she was a well-trained little vaudevillian, and Granny swelled with pride at seeing her granddaughters in such fine surroundings.

"Beneath a feathered wing I tie my heart,
The homing dove knows home is where thou art."

Fluttering, half flying, Alberta went through her dance.

"Lovely, adorable!" murmured the woman with the lorgnette.

The number was applauded to the echo.

"Pity we couldn't have done the clog for an extra," remarked Victoria.

Alberta didn't hear her. Darcy was singing. His voice, speaking or singing, alone or in company, was the only voice she ever heard now. She listened in pain. Perhaps, in fact almost certainly, this would be the very last time that she would ever hear it in reality. He sang two big arias and several lyrics. Alberta thought he did not get so much applause as he deserved, not nearly so much as at Keith's, where he was a big favorite. But she felt that, nevertheless, all the ladies must be in love with Darcy. Why

shouldn't they be? He would marry one of them—perhaps that pretty one in the front row, whose lips were parted as she listened to him. Alberta fancied that he had glanced toward the girl. Sometimes Alberta had hoped that he liked *her*, but of course she knew he really couldn't—not *enough*.

She dreaded the southern tour, the inconvenient train hours, the dirty theaters in the dull little towns. She would mind it more this time, after associating with these people—Darcy, the Carlions and their friends. “Nice people” she called them in her mind. Well, *they* had liked the act, anyhow. Perhaps the South would like it too—that was one consolation.

The performers had been asked to keep on their costumes, and to mingle with the audience afterward, for tea. Darcy was surrounded by admiring women.

“Look at the way Darcy strings the dames,” whispered Victoria. “I heard him say to that moon-faced Jane weighing two hundred pounds, that her eyes had been his inspiration, and then along comes one with a map like devastated France, and he comes up for air without a gasp. It was of you I was thinking, he says. Oh boy! Bert Barstow does an A-1 imitation of him.”

Alberta attributed these remarks to malice, always a source of much inspiration to Victoria.

It was only when the guests had thinned out that Darcy came over to congratulate Alberta. She looked up at him sadly.

"I guess this is good-by. We leave on the midnight to-morrow. You've been so kind. . . ."

"No man is ever kind, unless he wants to be. But this is no way to say good-by! Come out to tea to-morrow afternoon. We can be quiet, and talk about your future."

He was a little late in fetching her. She was downstairs waiting in the hallway. Even Theophilus noticed that she was nervous.

"Dere he is, Miss Filberta," he exclaimed finally, adding to himself as he looked after her, "Dem handsome fellers, dey sure can keep a lady waitin'. She ain't got 'nuff sperit, dat Filberta gal. My honey bunch would 'a' pasted me one on de lef' jaw dat would 'a' kep' me from disrememberin' my wrist-watch."

"I know a topping little tea-room way over by Sutton Place," said Darcy, as they crossed the Avenue. "We can see the steamboats on the river. It always reminds me of Cheyne Row in London."

She had never heard him speak of England before.

A swinging oval with the words THE PEWTER TEAPOT indicated the entrance. A few chintz-covered chairs, hard green painted settees, a banjo clock

and two old prints were supposed to give the air of an English tea-house to a low room within. A young woman in sage green with amber beads hanging in lumpy abundance over a concave chest welcomed Darcy, who was evidently an habitu  .

"Your usual order, I suppose, Mr. Darcy—tea, scones and jam."

Alberta loved jam, and she almost forgot, in the immediate pleasure of being with Darcy, that this was the last time she was to see him. The young woman with the beads had withdrawn discreetly. There were no other clients in the tea-room. Darcy talked glibly, mostly about himself, though he kept looking at the lovely hands that Carlion and he had so admired. Presently he covered one of them with his own.

"Don't draw away, my little Alberta."

She let her hand rest under his.

"My little Alberta," he had said. If she only could be *his* little Alberta, she thought. After all, she was young, there was time—if he did not forget her. Perhaps in the meantime she could learn enough—she had learned a great deal already—they might meet again. But she was afraid. The way those girls had looked at him at the Benefit yesterday! And they were lovely, exquisite, finished, the fine flower of breeding and of luxury.

When they came out they went and leaned for a moment over the parapet, looking at the river. It was dusk, like the beginning of that evening in Central Park. She was very close to him, almost huddled against him; it was instinctive. Suddenly she felt his arms around her. "*Mi paloma*," he said in Spanish. She did not resist him; the simplicity of her surrender was unmarred by any vulgarity of after-thought. She lifted her face to his. As he bent her backward like a bow, her fringed eyelids closed darkly beneath his hot quick kisses. She snuggled close to him as they turned westward again. "When shall we tell Granny? You would not mind if she lived with us part of the time?"

He looked sharply at her. Could it be that she was sophisticated enough to have set a trap for him? Truth has a way of convincing even the most cynical, and Darcy's glance fell before what he saw in her eyes.

"Tell Granny!" his tone was surprised, but not startled, his command of the technique of flirtation had not been acquired without experience. "Of course, darling, but why tell her now? You're booked for this southern tour—it would only upset her and make it difficult. I've got my concerts, too. Time enough in the spring, when we both come North again. Jove, how I hate these southern towns whose sole products are cotton and *cocottes*! After Jacksonville, it's all

right, of course—Miami and Palm Beach—one meets people that speak one's own language. And in the spring—we'll be really engaged! 'In the spring a young man's fancy——' You're too young even to have heard of Tennyson. I'm much too old for you, you know, *Paloma di mi corazón*. It's almost wicked—your sweet youth!" The commonplaces of the eluding male were fluent on his lips.

"Mr. Ransome reads Tennyson to me," interrupted Alberta, adding in the quaint phraseology that had often surprised Carlion, "And the gods are ageless." Her eyes looking up at him were like candles before a shrine.

They walked back and forth a number of times across Fifty-Seventh Street. "Let us live in the hour, my little Pansy Face, not waste time planning the time-tables of the Future. Fate will do that for us, besides all the stations on our line will be worth while," he said when Alberta showed a tendency to probe.

He kissed her again as he left her, tenderly at first, and then with a gust of real passion.

"Send me a list of the towns on your circuit. I'll write General Delivery every few days," he promised, giving her hand a final pressure. He watched her slow ascension in the elevator until it had passed beyond the open work of the cage.

"Poor little kid," he murmured to himself, turning away. He drew his soft woolen muffler across his chest to protect it from the sharp stiletto of a rising east wind. The episode was closed. There were reasons, several of them, why it *must* be closed. Yet he was regretful. A wave of self-pity swept over him. Darcy, like other incomplete artists, craved almost abnormally a daily dose of sympathy, approbation and applause. His aching vanity needed the poultice of even simulated appreciation. His apparent conceit was in reality merely inflation. Beneath it he writhed in the miseries of an inferiority complex. Alberta had deified him in his own eyes. Stupidly he had let it go too far. He shuddered as if he had just come from a warm room into the colder outer air. But a sidelong glance from a passing flapper reassured him. He straightened his shoulders, swaggering a little. After all—women always liked him.

He had no intention of returning to New York in the spring.

The Varleys' southern tour was ghastly, even more so than Alberta had foreseen. To begin with, all the places that should have been warm were consistently cold. The theaters and dressing-rooms were so shivery that Granny started a bad attack of bronchitis. It cur-

tailed her ability to sing "I don't want a girl from Birmingham," and dampened her spirit as well.

Las Palomas, as a number, did not please the South at all. The best trained of the four birds died the very first week. Alberta, crying softly, buried him in a big cigar box back of the movie house near the railway station. In fact, she cried a great deal, much to the impatient astonishment of Victoria, who seemed to be in a hard humor of "I told you so." Finally they shortened the dove dance, unpacked the starched baby dresses, and went back to clogging as their main feature.

And Alberta's heart grew heavy with the secret she was keeping from Granny. Granny was often anxious about the future, she knew that. Sometimes she heard her sighing over her needle-work. "It's wot's to come!" was all that she would answer to Alberta's questions at such times.

It would satisfy her on every ground to have one of her granddaughters marry a gentleman, who was at the same time an artist. She felt that Granny had guessed at something not quite clarified between her and Darcy and that she was correspondingly worried. Why had she not protested against this silence in the beginning? She reproached herself with her acquiescent timidity and with her adoration of Darcy.

Darcy had wished it, she had promised, there was no other way now, but it spoiled the purity of her joy and she wished constantly to talk of him. Fearing to betray herself she avoided mentioning his name altogether. She wrote to him however whenever she could, on scraps of paper, backs of envelopes, hasty scribbles not of reproach, but of homesick longing, for as yet she had no word from him.

The sharp-faced spinster at the General Delivery window of Caledonia's post-office was quite impatient with Alberta's constant calls. "There's only one train a day, and Caledonia ain't got no air mail connection with the No'th, you know."

At another town Alberta had rapped on the ledge of the Delivery window to attract the attention of a young man in striped shirt-sleeves, who, with his feet on a shelf and well tipped back in a swivel chair, was engrossed in the *Daily News*.

"May I see you just a moment?" she said.

"Sure thing," this ingratiating youth had replied, without moving. "You may look at me just as long as you like." Glancing up at the face framed in the opening he had relented, however, and had obligingly gone through all the back mail under "V" for two weeks past, winding up with an invitation to step across the street for a sundae.

There was never any letter. At first Alberta made excuses; they were moving from place to place; letters get lost; then she got panicky, he might be ill; he might be dead; she searched the papers to see if there had been an accident. By the time they reached Jacksonville, weeks later, she had almost faced it, almost decided that he never meant to write. She was growing very thin, and this made her look much older than Victoria; in the clog dance they were scarcely like twins any more. The terrible leaden heat of Jacksonville in April pressed upon her like a weight. She was also greatly worried about Granny. The terrific temperature of a hundred and ten in the shade did not seem to bake the bronchitis out of the shrunken chest of the one-time Vivian Varley. Alberta had noticed another change in Granny lately, a sort of confusion about time and people. She seemed to speak sometimes as if it were she who had danced the *Paloma*, and Alberta who was Dick Whittington. Alberta, trying not to embarrass her, ignored these mistakes.

The theater in Jacksonville, an enormous affair, was approached through an arcade of small shops that sold "souvenirs": Florida moccasins, sport hats, painted cocoanuts, slip-over frocks, and orangeade in huge bottles. The auditorium was cooled by means of enormous electric fans that kept the perspiring public in a

hurricane of draughts. A good many tourists were still stopping over on their way north and they had fairly good audiences. It was on the fourth night of their last weeks' engagement that the culmination of their ill-fated tour was reached. Alberta and Victoria had just got quite "a hand" in the *Paloma*. They had even had to take two calls.

Suddenly a stark horror stiffened Alberta to a taut rigidity. What was this terrible thing that was happening? Was it a nightmare? Was it real? Out on to the stage, her bonnet awry, her straggling gray hair falling in thin meshes from beneath her dark wig, her brown silk skirts held aloft in each poor old knotted hand, came mincing, prancing, ogling, the strange, grotesque little figure of Granny Crabtree. For one startled moment Alberta clutched Victoria's hand. Then she sprang forward, her arms wide, ready to enfold, to protect, to hide this pitiful madness, this grotesque delirium.

"I don't want a girl from Birmingham," quavered the chattering ghost of Vivian Varley. There had been a bewildered murmur in the audience, then the nervous intaking of a giant breath, then a burst of applause. They had decided that this was burlesque, intentional farce.

"I don't want a girl from——
I've heard such a lot——"

At last they were ringing the curtain down. Granny shook off Victoria and Alberta. A few shrill notes, a few wild gestures, and she had crumpled in the middle of the stage, a little brown heap, sprinkled with the ashes of her gray loosened hair.

They lifted her dead weight into the wings. She stared speechless, drooling in the dreadful rigidity of a complete paralysis, imprisoned as if in a straight jacket. The girls huddled together, weeping. A doctor, summoned from the audience, had telephoned for an ambulance. Alberta rode inside, holding her granny's cold hand. Only her eyes seemed still alive. Their lodgings faced the open square, the band was playing jazz for the evening concert as they carried her up the stairs. Alberta sat at the foot of the bed with the nurse, a young person, pleasantly callous, as any efficient nurse must be. At two in the morning Granny Crabtree was dead. "You know me, don't you, Granny darling?" Alberta besought her. The old eyes had a wild look of supplication. She had tried to speak. Mumbling and raucous, and hardly intelligible, came the words. "I don't want a girl from Birming——" But poor Granny, locked in the horror of aphasia, had

meant something quite different. In reality she was addressing a final supplication on behalf of Alberta and Victoria, to a welcoming God.

Miss Pringle dealt with the necessary officials by telephone, and also summoned the undertaker and a woman whose profession was to perform the ghastly toilet of the dead.

"We'll make your granny look real flossy—like she used to do when she was young," she said, extracting from her bag a pot of rouge and a lip stick.

Alberta burst into shivering tears. The doctor, who lived across the square, had arranged for a plot of land big enough for Granny to lie in. It wouldn't take much, Alberta thought. She had grown so small and thin during their tour. Alberta paid for it out of the chamois bag that always hung around Granny's neck. The money was in gold coin. To Granny's British idea, paper never represented real cash. "A sovereign's a sovereign, whatever happens," she had frequently declared.

It costs a great deal to die, and the chamois bag was presently quite depleted. The "artists" attended the funeral. Unfortunately, the clergyman rather scamped the service. He was to make a prayer at an important banquet for the Rotarians in the Windsor Hotel, and, being in a hurry, changed from his street

clothes to a surplice behind a bush near the grave. Alberta stepped back a moment to whisper just a last word to Granny.

The management had been very kind in letting the girls off the evening before (they had replaced them with local talent), but that night they had to go on as usual. "How'll we ever do it!" said Victoria. "I got the heebiejeebies."

"Granny wouldn't want us to fail the management, you know," said Alberta. "My legs feel like cotton wool, but we'll get through some way. It's the last night, anyhow."

"Yes," said Victoria, "it's the last night all right."

Alberta had decided that they would stay on in Jacksonville long enough to see about the cross for Granny's grave. She suggested to Victoria that they then go back to Mrs. Withers as they had originally planned. She knew she could get work posing. So could Victoria, for that matter. And then through the agencies, with a week's engagement here and there, they'd manage for the summer. Alberta had been astonished at the violence of Victoria's grief. She had grumbled often about Granny's discipline, and had resented her advice, yet her sorrow had been tempestuous and sincere.

Keyed up to that professional valiance which is

the personal honor of actors, they went through their act that evening creditably.

They were ready for bed, and Alberta had just turned off the light, when Victoria, who had seemed nervous, suddenly said with a sort of gulp: "I've something to tell you, Alberta. I might as well get it over and done with. I'm not going back with you. I can't anyway. I'm married to Bert Barstow."

"Victoria!" A cry of dismay escaped Alberta. She switched on the light, she must *see* her sister, see if it was true. Victoria blinked a little in the sudden glare, then, looking down, she went on hurriedly.

"I'm going to have a baby. I telegraphed Bert, and I'm going straight out to meet him in Chicago on the flyer to-morrow. He wired me the money yesterday. They are doing big business out there. His act is a wow. He's signed fourteen weeks, and they want him at the Winter Garden later. I guess I won't have to work any more. It's a nuisance about—especially as Bert doesn't know. I didn't like to tell Granny, so I held on."

"When were you married?" asked Alberta, stricken with sudden suspicion.

Victoria's gaze had been shifty. "When or where is nobody's business," she retorted. "We *are* married, and that's all there is to it."

Alberta melted. "Do you really love him, Victoria?" Her arms were around her twin now. "I shall adore being an aunt."

Victoria had not even suggested that she come with her.

"I'm sorry, awfully sorry, Alberta," she kept saying, but she made no further proposal. "You'll get on fine without me. What was it Granny was always quoting? Something about down to Gehenna or up to the throne. You even said yourself I held you back."

Alberta, clinging desperately in the darkness to the sister now representing her one remaining relation to humanity, wondered how she could ever have thought for an instant that Victoria was a detaining influence. She repressed a sob, but Victoria felt it heave against her shoulder.

"I thought perhaps there was something between you and Darcy." She stroked Alberta's arm softly. "You ought to get some one with real class anyhow. You've got all that is really any good in the family. You're the family jewel casket, and I guess I'm the trash basket. You just go right back to New York and tie up to the Carlion bunch, and remember what I tell you—to get money, get next to money."

They were sitting on the edge of the bed in the funny little nighties, trimmed with cheap laces, that

Granny had always insisted on making for them, their soft arms around each other's necks. Alberta's heart was heavy, not only with the chill of her own prospective loneliness, but with a dull fear for Victoria's future. Bert Barstow, with all his cleverness, seemed such a poor bet. She was five minutes older than Victoria, and her seniority had always seemed as many years. They went to sleep fast in each other's arms.

The next day was Sunday, and Alberta put Victoria on the Chicago express. She just *had* to cry as she walked along the ugly street lined with sailors' boarding-houses and warehouses for the shipment of oranges. The tears were rolling down blindingly as she turned up from the water-front toward the square. Several men turned to look at her. She had bought a plain black crêpe de chine frock at Cohan's Big Store and, almost unconsciously, she had dropped the artificiality of her unduly prolonged, professional childhood. Even her curls were tucked away beneath a close hat in distant imitation of Mrs. Carlion.

She stopped at a shop to buy some King County oranges that were all she could even consider for luncheon, and was fumbling for change in her bag when the long shadow of a man standing in the bright sunshine of the door fell across her. "Why, Pansy Face," said a startled voice. "Is it really you?"

It was Darcy. He glanced at her dress, at the black veil, then without any transition, "How lovely you are!"

Swiftly then, they moved out into the street as she began to tell him her story. It flowed from her spontaneously like the river toward the sea, waters meeting waters. It seemed natural to be with him, now that all had failed her. It was like coming home—a home that had nothing to do with brick and mortar—the everlasting refuge in the spirit of some one who loved her, for somehow she felt that he did love her, even if he had not written. These had been days nightmarish, terrible, but here was reality at last, and it was beautiful.

Darcy listened, hearing only half of all that she said. Through his mind surged the conflict that had torn him during the months of his absence from her. She had not even asked him to explain why he had not written. What was she assuming, he wondered?

He had intended definitely to make good his escape. At once cold and passionate, however, he had during his absence suffered more from the complications of his dual nature than he would ever have believed possible, judging from former sentimental emergencies. Slowly his resistance was forced to the wall. All during his tour, with a maddening persistence, Alberta

had introduced herself into every hour of his day. He had resented this obsession, but he knew of old that the only way to exorcise it was to satisfy it. He had realized some time ago that he would look Alberta up as soon as he got north.

They had arrived in their aimless walk at a dreary sort of park, or zoological garden. There was a small sheltering shadow in one corner; they walked toward it, and for a moment her head rested on his breast, just at the height of his heart.

Suddenly then, he knew that he must possess her—her suavity, her yielding gentleness—at any price, even a high one! Yet he was still enough himself to attempt a bargain. With Granny providentially removed, and Victoria out of the way, the road seemed miraculously cleared, and it might be quite possible. . . .

He began to tell her of his plans and presently he hired an open motor and they drove across a long bridge until they came to a wide promenade near the water. It was cool there, and they sat on a bench, hand in hand. He was going to Milan to study with Ceretti. His arrangements were all made, he was sailing from Havana for Genoa on an Italian steamer the following week. That route was cheaper.

“We can’t do things just as I would like, you know. But my stateroom is quite big enough for two.” He

frowned. "I'm perpetually hard up, because of the money I have to send back to England to—to—my people. I mean to say—to my mother and sisters." He swerved before the truth.

"I didn't know your mother was living," said Alberta. "Do tell me about——"

"When we might talk about *us*?" interrupted Darcy, pressing her hand. But Alberta insisted.

"Well," he began rather jerkily, "here goes, then, for dull statistics. My father had a living in Dorsetshire, a vicarage, you know. They managed to send me to Harrow and Oxford. My older sister even took a position as governess to help me out."

"Only while you were little, at school," said Alberta. She couldn't conceive of a young man allowing a woman to work to send him to a university. "Naturally!" Darcy saw what was expected of him. "I owe a great deal to my people, you see, and I must keep on sending money. That's one reason why marrying——"

"Of course you must look after them," interrupted Alberta. "I can help. Where do they live now? I wonder if they'll like me?"

"Oh, I seldom see them any more, though I practically support them entirely."

Alberta's eyes held a satisfactory admiration of his generosity. "I do hope they'll like your wife, when

they *do* meet her," she repeated, a little tremulously. There was a vision in her mind of a gray-haired old lady, in Victorian black silks, and two big, rather mannishly tailored ladies. Darcy translated into the feminine would not be handsome.

Darcy shuddered. Then suddenly a tiny breeze swept a loosened strand of her hair against his face. Something gave way in him. "Listen, *mi paloma*," his own voice startled him, "we can be married tomorrow. I've known in the last months that I couldn't live without you. As a matter of fact, I never *have* lived without you. You've been there all the time, ever since the first day I saw you."

Holding her in his arms, his lips on hers, thought and prudence had quite left him. He could waste no time in persuasions, in overcoming prejudices. And after all, he comforted himself as they climbed back into the motor, he ought to be willing to come forward with that little bribe so dear to feminine hearts—a ring . . . and a "for better or for worse." In Florida these things were done easily, without inconvenient questions, or too much investigation. Funny, how women persisted in wanting to petrify moonlight and crucify sunbeams. If they only wouldn't put passions in camphor balls! Well, all that didn't matter. She would be a charming little companion in Milan.

That night Alberta wrote a long letter to Victoria. "Where shall I tell her to address us?" she asked Darcy.

"*Fermo in Posta*, General Delivery, Milan," he said. "Give me your letter. I'll put special stamps on it."

CHAPTER VI

THEY were objects of considerable interest on the steamer from Havana. Alberta attributed the insistent gaze of the passengers to the natural admiration for this magnificent being who was now her husband. In reality it was the compelling air of romance about them that attracted attention, the contrast of Alberta's radiant innocence and the evident sophistication of her companion.

"They don't look married, do they?" said a woman whose unbeautiful youth had spared her all complications. "Sort of adventurous, you know. He's years older than she is; but no man is even worth thinking about until he is over thirty-five."

"I must learn all I can," Alberta kept saying, "to keep up with you. A lady ought to speak several languages, oughtn't she?"

"Well—no," said Darcy. "That's more characteristic of head waiters or adventuresses."

They were driving through the streets of Naples, where the steamer had called, and Darcy had been speaking in Italian with the loquacious cab driver who

sat backward on his block, the reins negligently twisted around his elbow, in order to facilitate conversation, and also to stare at Alberta. "How beautiful your daughter is," he remarked to Darcy, who did not think it necessary to inform her that he had been taken for her father. Alberta was greatly impressed with stately Genoa, where they finally landed, and rather regretted that they must hurry on to Milan, but she was a reasonable young person, and Darcy had grumbled at the cost of travel. "We'll go directly to the Pension Benoni," he said. "That's where I stayed when I was studying with Ceretti before."

The Pension Benoni was situated on the fourth floor of the Palazzo Guarini. A palazzo in Milan does not mean a palace, unless one can call an ordinary stucco-faced house a palace. Perhaps the grandiloquence of the name thus applied is simply an indication of the pleasant Italian exaggeration in the direction of embellishment.

The Pension Benoni, celebrated all over the world, was the private enterprise of La Mamma Benoni. Though styled Hotel Pension, it had no other incorporation than her fat person. In fact, Mamma Benoni *was* the Pension Benoni. True, she had an assistant, but that was chiefly a provision for the safe outlet of La Mamma's gusty temper. Although this associate

was supposed to hold an interest in the business, she could never have hoped to inherit it, for when Mamma Benoni died the pension would die with her.

Tina Benoni had been a coloratura singer whose intensive tremolo had shaken her voice to pieces before she was forty. At fifty it was difficult to imagine her reputed success in *La Figlia del Reggimento*, from which she still trilled snatches of the rataplan aria whenever the weather was unusually fine, or the business going well. The business was a sort of double-barreled affair—well suited to her taste and capacity. Not only did she purvey in her catering to the gastro-nomic taste of all the Italian provinces, South America and Cuba; but, acting as a sort of go-between for singers and impresarios, she secured bookings for her clientele. Seated at the head of her long table d'hôte, attired in silk and damask when in full regalia, or occasionally in a loose dressing jacket of crude pink silk, when the constrictions of her high-breasted corset had proved too painful, her conversation was by turns reminiscently professional or alertly personal. Not only did she know everybody and everything, she knew *about* everybody and everything. And she kept open house. No singer of renown ever thought of passing through Milan without dropping in at midday to eat spaghetti or a *pasta* with La Mamma, and to give her

a kiss. Bonci, Caruso, Veriglio and many others had registered their affection resoundingly on La Mamma's fat cheek.

She had her own ideas of business honesty; the rich paid for the poor, capacity for incapacity. Ethically this seemed to her superior morality, and who, loving his brother, shall maintain that it is not? The lire ran as easily up and down the scale of prices as her voice had been wont to ascend and descend the gamut of tones. She would overcharge a singer abominably on his return from a remunerative tour of the United States of America, and keep and feed the same man royally for a lira a day if he were out of work. No one ever complained. She was La Mamma Benoni and as such remained unchallenged. The very massiveness of her figure contributed to the majesty of her power. The women who are the confidantes of men are generally fat women. They are the women of good counsel. Every man and woman is really only a rather terrified little boy or girl at heart, and Mamma Benoni was something to tie to. She had never been known to leave Milan but once, since the days of her defunct glories as a singer. That was when she dashed down to Perugia to hold the hand of a young Brazilian singer who, stricken with appendicitis, had been unskilfully operated upon while filling an engagement there. He

had died with his head resting on her expansive bosom, and his last moments furnished a topic of conversation at table for weeks after her return.

"How dreadful! he suffered much! 'Mamma,' he cried, you know with his beautiful tenor voice! He was quite green. The professor who operated told me," etc., etc.

Tears rolled unrestrained over the damask roses that decorated La Mamma's chest, but Verucci, farther down the table, had made a diversion by describing in full detail the deathbed of his father—"Padre mio," etc., etc.

On the evening of the Darcys' arrival, dinner was just over. La Mamma, seated near a victrola which was throwing off a record of Bonci's *La Donna è Mobile*, was volubly endeavoring to interest a manager in a young Russian soprano. The little reception room was a chattering bedlam of half a dozen languages, when the lift, which came straight up into the private life of the pension, suddenly disgorged Darcy and Alberta in its midst. There was a pause. "*La Donna è Mobile—chi—mai sperar,*" ground out the victrola.

"Well, well, *il signor Darci!*" La Mamma, hoisting herself from the depths of the upholstered chair, rolled to meet him. She kissed him on one cheek only. After all he was English, not really *simpatico*, a singer of the

second class. He should pay her well; the Russian girl was six weeks behind with her bill; things always balanced.

"*Contentissima*," she remarked, which was strictly true. Alberta, who had been occupied in telling a small page about the luggage, now turned.

"And what a beauty!" cried La Mamma.

"My wife," said Darcy, introducing.

"Really," replied La Mamma. She looked at him sharply. She was not a strict moralist in any sense, but she preferred being dealt with as man to man. "My compliments! Is she American?"

Alberta's soft eyes gazed uncomprehendingly at La Mamma with their usual gentleness. Her little white face drooped, for she was tired, and she looked small and appealing.

A basso on the other side of the room fixed his monocle in place. "*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare,*" he quoted.

Some of the company knew Darcy; they came forward one by one to salute him, but he received no great ovation of welcome.

"Did you see how jealous they all were?" he said, when they had been shown to their room by a little page who looked like Cupid in buttons. The child had flung the door open. "A fine room," he remarked,

"with conjugal bed," he explained, with a flourishing gesture toward a wide footless couch. It was warm and he pushed the shutters open before leaving.

The Piazza del Duomo lay bathed in moonlight, dreamlike, white, fantastic. The left of the square, bordered by the famous Galleria, twinkled with brightly lighted shop windows. Clanging cable-cars, following one another in close succession, crawled like a bright serpent around the edges of the wide space in front of the cathedral. Alberta leaned on the parapet of the tiny balcony; Darcy's arm stole about her.

Next morning they started out early to see Ceretti. Darcy pointed out the Ricordi Publishing houses, the Scala Theater.

Ceretti lived in a narrow dark street, near the opera-house. Darcy and Alberta arrived rather breathlessly at the top of the steep fourth flight of a dreary stone house. A frowsy maid conducted them into an office where Signora Ceretti, a famous feminist and radical, with the short gray hair and one-piece "reform" dress of her calling, sat making out a report. Her proportions were so generous as to give her a Buddha-like appearance, and were further attested to by a number of cotton undergarments of large size drying on a cord suspended across one end of the room. Her demeanor suggested neither self-consciousness nor apology.

"Will you accommodate yourselves," she said, indicating two chairs. "*Il maestro* will soon be at liberty." Frequently interrupted scales were audible from the adjoining room. Presently she looked up from her work. "Ah, I recall—*il Signor Darci, non è vero*, English tenor? I greatly admire the feminism of England," she continued. "We lack a real liberator like la Signora Pankhurst, though we have our radical poetess, Ada Negri."

The studio door opened to let a pupil pass out. A queer figure stood on the sill, bent and small and wearing a black silk skull-cap. Penetrating eyes gazed from cavernous sockets. The glance of *Il Cavaliere Ceretti* was the revelation of the man.

"Pass, *Signori*," he said courteously. "Ah, *il Paolo Darci*—I remember. You are here because you need me. Then it is that you did not follow my advice."

"But, *Maestro*——" began Darcy.

"There are two ways," interrupted Ceretti, "the long way and the short way; years of unrewarded study, or quick success ending in inevitable failure. Come, have you ruined your voice, or can I still help you?" He was at the piano now. "Sing!" he commanded, as he struck a chord. And Darcy sang.

"What a pity!" groaned the little old man. "Again! *Meno male*," he cried this time. "We may still save it."

He had paid no attention at all to Alberta, who sat in the shadows of the dark room.

"Four lessons a week for the first," he said. "We shall see, later."

"Four lessons! I'm afraid you'll have to do with one, for your violin, Alberta. Ceretti's cachet is heavy for Italy," said Darcy, as they went down the stairs.

Love is never aware of sacrifice. Alberta was scarcely disappointed. She could wait now for anything, so long as Paul was happy and progressing. For she was one of those rare people who love art and beauty selflessly enough to be glad to see the pursuit of them, whether or not they themselves are the protagonists.

They hired a piano at once, and she began settling their room for the long hot summer that lay ahead of them. The room was at the end of a hallway, and she got La Mamma's consent to hang a chintz curtain across the passage, thus making a little nook where she could sit when Darcy, who was a nervous worker, wanted to practise alone. At first he swore almost as much as he sang, for his temper was the principal ingredient of his temperament. Alberta had put away her violin, fearing to annoy him. She did not want to ask Darcy for the money for lessons, since he had never mentioned them again.

Eager to improve herself in some way, she began "sight-seeing"—Leonardo's *Last Supper*, the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the Ambrosiana, the Brera. She also bought a dictionary and a grammar, and studied Italian intensively. She even got the little page boy, Alessandro, to help her with her accent. Alessandro appealed to her. He was far too tiny to be in service, not more than eight years old. His duties comprised a little of almost everything: helping set the tables in the dining-room; brushing off the crumbs between courses; posting letters; running errands; lugging cumbersome valises overheavy for his baby arms. In August there was a slight slackening in La Mamma's trade, and Alessandro had more leisure. Forgetting his professional capacity, he sat on Alberta's lap like any other baby, as she tried to talk to him in her halting Italian. He was warm and sweet, and invariably held up his cheek for a kiss at the end of the lesson.

Passing a big wardrobe in the hall one evening, and hearing curious nestling sounds within, Alberta discovered that Alessandro slept on one of the shelves. After that she made him a bed out of two cushions at the end of her corridor, and he lay curled like a puppy almost across their door-sill.

"I'd love to have a baby of my own," she ventured one day to Darcy.

"For heaven's sake, Alberta," he said, "that would be the final catastrophe!" He had had a bad day's practise. *Il maestro* had been more than usually severe.

"I thought all men wanted to have children."

"Not the ones who——" he stopped suddenly. "Artists shouldn't have children," he concluded.

Next day he spoke of the violin lessons. He had been touched by the hint of loneliness in their conversation of the day before.

"Bring your fiddle along, and we'll ask the *maestro* whom he can recommend."

Alberta played for *Il Cavaliere*. He had never taken much notice of her. Now he looked at her piercingly. "Have you ever sung?" he asked.

"Only a very little," said Alberta.

"Let me hear you," he commanded.

"She has no voice, *maestro*," interjected Darcy hastily.

Il maestro disregarded him.

"A scale! I thought so—again—still again." He bent his head over the keys, cocking his head on one side as he climbed the scale higher and higher. She touched high C with ease.

"*Cara signora*, you can outsing your violin," he said. "I want you for my pupil, for the voice. I refuse to hand you over to Martelone for the violin."

Alberta's heart gave a wild throb. She looked at Paul.

"I am afraid," he said quickly, "that such a thing is quite out of the question. We could scarcely afford——"

"I will take her without payment, because I am sure," said the *maestro*.

Alberta burst into a stammer of happiness. But there was something dampening in Darcy's silence.

"And for yourself," said the master, looking slyly, almost maliciously at Darcy, "it will be of a precious succor.

"Then it is settled," he said at the doorway, "until to-morrow."

Darcy did not speak on the way back to the Benoni's. He sulked all the afternoon and she did not dare refer to the occurrences of the morning. In the evening he proposed that they should go to Biffi, the famous café in the Galleria. The Cova, frequented by the big singers was too dear, and really not half so amusing. At Biffi the tables were on the sidewalk, and all the world passed by. Alberta hung on his arm, and made him stop to look at the showily set jewels in the windows of the Arcade. "Why do you want to stare at all the things I can't give you?" said Darcy irritably. "It's humiliating to a man!"

"I don't really want them, Paolo darling," she said. "How could I use them? It is just that they are pretty to look at."

He sat down moodily at the little round table and ordered coffee. "Not too hot," he told the *garçon*. He was forever thinking of his throat.

Alberta loved the Galleria; it was gay and foreign. One saw such strange people, some of them mysterious—one woman especially. She was always alone, lingering yet never pausing. Alberta had seen her many times on the Piazza Del Duomo at the corner. She was rather old and quite ugly, and once Alberta had noticed a magnificent lieutenant of the *Granatieri* laugh as he passed her. These Italians always stared a lot. There was one to-night, at the next table, who sat looking at her. When she rose to go she accidentally tipped over her coffee cup. A few drops splashed his blue cape. "*Tanti scusi*," she apologized in her stumbling Italian. "Your cloak is stained—I'm so sorry." Rising, he saluted, bending forward. "Signorina," he whispered, "it shall never be wiped off."

"Damned ass!" muttered Darcy, adding, "How is it that you make yourself so conspicuous lately? It is bad form altogether, and it is growing on you. Ceretti never even noticed you until to-day. It would be much more to the point if he gave *me* free lessons. He owes

them to me, as a matter of fact, for not placing my voice right at first."

"Perhaps he thought we might sing together sometime," Alberta said soothingly.

"Sing together!" cried Darcy. "Do you realize, my dear child, what it means to become an artist? I could not very well allow my wife simply to walk on to the stage in a fourth-rate rôle and sing a few notes, probably flat."

Alberta flushed; she knew her voice was true as a tuning fork. His mood was hard to bear. Moreover it was difficult to explain, except in a way so ugly that she turned from it. Nevertheless in her heart she had no intention of declining Ceretti's offer. She had longed for this opportunity, prayed for it, saved for it. It had come. She intended to take it. There was a fundamental hardness inside the soft sheath of Alberta's character. Several times of late Darcy had struck with short ugly words into their relation, struck above all, at the image of himself that she had set up. To-night she felt it crumbling. She was seriously angry at him for the first time. She rose hastily, wishing with her instinctive dislike for vulgarity to avoid a scene.

"A man is never too decrepit to be influenced by sex," Darcy remarked a few weeks later. He was in

a nasty humor. His voice was not responding as he had hoped to Ceretti's science. For the moment the *maestro* had even forbidden him to use it. He complained constantly that Ceretti had lost interest. "He's getting senile, that's where it is," he cried. "It's absurd to say that my voice won't be in condition for three years. Three years—good God! I couldn't stand this life for three years, and there's the confounded money to be thought of!" The constant tax of that monthly remittance to England was a terrific drain upon them. She thought it very noble of Darcy to continue to contribute in this way, toward the maintenance of his mother and sisters.

"They seem to take it pretty well for granted," she said to him one day.

"Yes; I stopped sending the allowance for a time," he answered. "But they found out where I was and there was the devil to pay."

"Found out where you were?" repeated Alberta.

"Yes," explained Darcy hastily, "I never write to them. You must remember that I'm the black sheep," he added, "an opera singer! And now I've even married an actress!"

"They don't object to fleecing you of your black wool, though," she remarked.

"The way of the world," sighed Darcy, who fancied

that the martyr attitude was rather becoming. She imagined his sisters ugly, the kind of women that would never marry.

Ceretti had told her something to-day which she hesitated to break to him. However, she must venture it sometime. "*Il maestro* says another year might see me ready for an audition before one of the impresarios. If I got an engagement at one of the little theaters it would help about the money," she said as they turned into the narrow *via*. All remarks concerning her career were like two-edged swords. Anxious that he should not be hurt she hastened to add, "Of course I shall never be anything but the pot-boiling singer of the family, just passing the tin-cup until you do the big things that will make our fortune."

The report that Alberta was Ceretti's favorite pupil had reached the Casa Benoni some time before, and the status of the Darcys was in consequence greatly improved. They were now members of the diplomatic circle, the *Schleppenkur*. La Mamma had moved their seats to the long central banqueting board which stretched the length of the dining-room, and to which none but consecrated talents were admitted.

"We shall have to let in Darcy, too. But as to that one——" she shrugged. "And also, even as a man, he is *antipatico*."

To La Mamma, Alberta was already a potential business asset. In a climate similar to her native Madrid, her beauty had flowered with her talent. The pansy eyes were softer and more languid, the tendrils of her dark hair damasked with closer shadows the whiteness of her cheeks. Her supple waist and lovely, long hands gave her an appearance of race. She had become a beauty of the first magnitude. To-day, as they entered the dining-room, there was the usual chorus of admiring praise, that flattered Darcy in his sense of possession as a man, and at the same time goaded to exasperation his vanity as an artist.

"*Carina assai.*" Variglio's monocle detailed her. "Youth! The joy time and beauty! She will be a perfect Mimi." Variglio was in high humor. La Mamma had just signed him for Buenos Aires at a thousand a night. He was to open in *Il Pagliacci*. "Come over here, *carina*, to gossip with me." He drew out a chair.

"No, here," boomed Giacinto, a basso profundo. "These tenors are only Polichinelles that think too well of themselves. Woman likes virility."

An Australian soprano across the table looked rather sourly down her nose.

"Listen, little one!" called La Mamma from the head of the table. She was performing wonders in

winding some rebellious spaghetti round her fork; one fat jeweled hand held a huge napkin in place on her breast; flushed spots, due to the Chianti, blotched her cheeks. "Dos Passos, he of Brazil, asked me to see Ceretti about a future engagement for you. He wanted to hear you. A supposition! Ceretti might have you prepared by next season. The Brazil, it is rich and a contract——"

"What nonsense!" interrupted Darcy. "The *maestro* would be mad! My wife has been studying barely six months; it would only result in a fiasco!"

"Who knows?" screeched La Mamma, her voice shrill as a peacock's. "*Il maestro* is perhaps capable of judging these things. This girl has not your English blood of a fish, *caro mio*. . . . A matter of jealousy," she whispered to Variglio. "So antipathetic, that Darcy!"

"Possibly in four or five years she could make her *début*," continued Darcy, "in some secondary part, like Michaele to my Don Jose."

La Mamma paused for a moment and stuffed a piece of thick white bread into one cheek to balance the spaghetti. Having washed down the whole with a long draught of Chianti, she wiped the red mustache made by the wine from her upper lip.

"Listen, Darcy. You are a big fine man to drive

women mad—that we know. But you are not quite big enough to hide the sun. Do you understand me?"

Darcy flushed, then he laughed rather laboriously. The only way to receive La Mamma's sarcasm was to take it as a jest.

"A piece of bread?" whispered Alessandro on his rounds, thrusting the basket between Alberta and Variglio.

"Ah, Alessandro—another of your lovers, *Signora*, I saw him in a corner kissing a kodak of you yesterday. Is it not true, Alessandro?" laughed the basso.

Sandro did not blush; he raised his big luminous eyes to Alberta with unembarrassed admiration. She put one arm tenderly around the tiny figure, so pathetic in its livery of service, and drawing him close to her, took a roll from his basket. The basso threw him two *soldi* and Sandro pulled one of his curls in salute. "Many thanks. Good appetite, *Signori*," he said as he passed on down the table.

All through the summer Alberta worked patiently on in spite of the burning heat. Darcy's effort was far more intermittent, unfavorable conditions threw him out. Everything irritated him, above all Alberta's practise. There was a mason working on an adjacent building, whose full-throated rendition of an aria from

Aïda invariably drove Darcy out into the Galleria or the Corso. It maddened him to feel that lavish gods had bestowed on the mason and on Alberta what he must wrest from their reluctance.

"*Va bene, va bene,*" Ceretti would say to Alberta at her lesson. "*Chi va piano, va sano!* God made you a singer, Albertina *mia*, it remains for Ceretti to make you an artist. Dos Passos had heard. He wanted you at once. Oh well, I was ready enough to show my jewel even uncut, but he can not have it until it is polished. Without haste, Piccinina, without haste."

Late in August Ceretti left for a rest at Livorno. Milan, perpetually washed and yet never clean, was unpleasantly odoriferous at that season. Sluiced and watered every morning, by noon it was as hard and dry as ever. The noise of the cable-cars echoed in the head as if the brain were of metal. Every one sought shadow with a sort of desperation. The heat and light were nerve racking. Darcy and Alberta occasionally spent a week-end at Como. The trips, though expensive, became the sort of superfluity that seems essential.

There on the terraces of the Villa d'Este, Alberta and Darcy recaptured something of the old mood of their honeymoon. Alberta, almost Oriental in her sweetness and docility, had always lured him in spite

of himself, yet he could not really enjoy her. Almost at the height of his passion he would suddenly resent in her the professional rival. His caresses then had a fierceness suggestive of subjugation. Often he secretly cursed the day he had met her.

The *maestro* returned much refreshed from his season at Livorno. September in Milan was magnificent, he assured Alberta. "The climate in general is far better than in your tropical New York. I spent 1896 there. Your chief products are dead horses and mosquitoes. And the little voice! Let us see as to that." He struck a chord. "*Bravissima!*" And then, authoritatively, "We will prepare seriously for your *début*."

"And my husband?" questioned Alberta, her eyes full of anxiety, and a pain that was not even vicarious.

"Listen," said Ceretti, "now all is finished for your husband. He should not even try to sing again."

"Oh," cried Alberta. She burst into an agony of tears. "But it will kill him! It will spoil everything. He will hate me." After a moment she added, in a sort of shamed whisper, "He says I shall never make my *début* without him."

"Ah, he says that, does he?" The bent old man in the skull-cap straightened himself. "And he dares to call himself an artist? Does he not know we are chan-

nels—not reservoirs? That we must let art and life flow through us? On, and out as they will? That we can not detain them, dam them up? Often and often they sweep beyond and leave us empty. Was I not once the great tenor, Ceretti? So you are forbidden to sing without him, are you?” he went on. “Very well, he shall sing for a little while. I will give him a voice, that you may sing, beautiful bird of my heart. Listen! He shall sing once, twice, three times, and then——”

Maliciously therefore Ceretti began to coax Darcy to work more conscientiously, encouraging him, even flattering him. It was not often that Ceretti thus compromised with his artistic conscience. In the cause of Alberta's success, however, he felt justified and he knew enough about the jealousy of singers to realize that the situation was crucial. Women he knew also, their sudden follies, their stupid sacrifices; one was never sure of them. Alberta might even throw up a career rather than lose Darcy. “*Chi lo sa?* But what is to be, will be and this time I, Ceretti will play Fate!”

In summer Milan is like a cauldron. In winter the cold finds the marrow of one's bones. The Pension Benoni advertised “Central Heating and all modern comforts.” Alberta often wondered where this center was, whence the heat was supposed to come. She

wished she could go to it, but she felt it must be very distant, perhaps in the bowels of the earth. Occasionally if you felt the pipes of the small radiator and made believe a great deal, you could detect a faint warmth. Mamma Benoni, being of a generous temperament, furnished a *scaldino* or brazier for each room. Sandro would bring it in full of hot coal and covered neatly with ashes.

"Here is Vesuvius for the Signora," he would say, never tiring of a joke that Darcy had once made. The Mamma, in spite of *tous les comforts modernes*, went about tied up in a red woolen shawl that made her look like a stuffed tomato; the shivering *pensionnaires* grew blue and mottled and had the appearance of needing hot baths to stimulate circulation and promote cleanliness. Every one had unpleasant colds with loose rumbling coughs. In short, winter in Milan was just another circle of Milan's climatic hell.

Darcy suffered from the weather far more than Alberta. For several weeks he lay ill with bronchitis and was so feverish that Alberta in order not to annoy him went to Ceretti's for her practise. The doctor's bill was accordingly heavy, and Darcy, extravagant in superfluities, resented spending money on necessities. Cursing the cost and inefficiency of medicine he thrashed about in his bed.

"Ceretti is holding me back because of you," he said angrily one day, "just stringing the whole thing out. I am absolutely ready to take an engagement once I get over this beastly cold and I am going to tell the old beggar so. It's damned unreasonable to rein in a fast horse, because the slow one can't keep his gait."

His threats of leaving Milan altogether finally brought Ceretti reluctantly to terms. He would have preferred one more season for the perfecting of Alberta's style. However her natural gift would insure success.

"The English are a nation of merchants," he said unconsciously quoting Napoleon, but at last he capitulated and promised a try-out for the late spring. After that they worked as many hours as Ceretti would allow them. Darcy's spirits rose at the prospect of release. They permitted themselves evenings at the Scala, and went also to the Dal Verme to see Mimi Aguglia, Zacconi and Novelli, and Darcy spent money lavishly in liqueurs and extras of all kinds at the pension.

They made their *début* for one evening as guests in the little opera-house in Parma. Ceretti had arrived before the performance and listened from a first row box, gravely and without manifestation of any kind. He

wore his inevitable skull-cap and looked like a wise and lonely old bird, seated in the back of its cage. After the first act, he descended to encourage and commend his pupils. At the end he kissed Alberta on both cheeks. "My homages, *cara mia*, you will be a great artist."

Alberta valued these few words from Ceretti more than the indiscriminate *bella, simpatica, brava* of the provincial audience. Darcy, on the other hand, glowed with the more fulsome and direct tribute to his vanity. He appeared scarcely to notice the reticence of the master with regard to himself. Alberta had felt that he sang remarkably well, though she feared that he was forcing his tone a little. He was exuberantly happy on the way back to the Albergo.

The critics were more than kind. Some of their flamboyant paragraphs were copied into the Milanese papers. A month later, to the extreme joy of La Mamma, they were offered a joint engagement at la Pergola, in Florence. In the meantime they were to sing one night engagements at Bologna, at Perugia, at Verona.

"Economize your voice, Darcy," commanded Ceretti before they started. "Conserve it for the lovely Florentine ladies. They will be worth your attention." Ceretti's manner was always a bit satirical with Darcy.

"You are easily what they call in your America, a 'God of the Morning'—no, a *matinée* idol, that is the word. In Italy there are no gods of the mornings—our nights are too romantic."

Unfortunately, Darcy paid no attention to the *maestro's* advice. He threw away his gold in handfuls with a spendthrift's largesse, singing on his chords to obtain easy effects before any audience, in every town. He was drunk with the success of which he had so long been deprived. At Verona, two weeks before their *début* at the Pergola, he took cold. It settled into laryngitis. Frightened, they hastened back to Milan, to consult a doctor and the *maestro*.

"Rest," commanded the *maestro*. "Not a word, not a cigarette."

"Inhalations every half hour," prescribed the doctor.

Alberta was unremitting as a nurse. She applied plasters, lighted the inhaling lamp, scarcely allowed him to speak, even in a whisper. Naturally he was wildly nervous, his irritability ranging from a sullen anger at Fate, to a furious whisper denouncing the folly of doctors and the incompetence of singing masters.

It was during these days of anxiety that Alberta first noticed that Darcy was giving himself *piqûres*. "They are camphor for the heart," he said. His cold was giving him palpitations.

"Did the doctor recommend them?" questioned Alberta.

"No, not that damned fool!" replied Darcy. "A fellow from St. Guy's gave me the prescription long ago."

Fortunately, his voice cleared up a few days before the engagement at the Pergola, and they arrived in Florence, both keyed to the highest pitch, and Alberta still anxious.

The Pergola is a huge barn of a theater, a far bigger auditorium to fill than any in which they had yet sung. The opera was again *Bohème*. Darcy tried his voice in the afternoon at the hotel. He was always either in the depths of depression or blindly elated. Today his confidence struck Alberta as almost like the roseate view generally induced by alcohol.

She did not altogether share his optimism about his complete recovery. There was a strained quality in the upper registers. Fearing to dampen his courage, she ventured only to advise him to stop trying his top notes.

The evening began triumphantly for both of them. Her voice, crystalline as a fountain, bubbled clear, free, effortless, from a throat quite unconstricted, opened by the magical key of the *maestro's* science. The audience liked also the handsome, personable, Rodolfo. "*Bel ragazzo*," came from all sides. The Italians adore

tenors—he was applauded almost as much as Alberta.

“The voice a little cold—he has not the fine, open throat of the Mimi,” commented a critic. They were singing the quartet of the third act. Almost as he spoke, Darcy’s voice, strained from the duo of the first act, broke in reaching the high C.

No one who has not been present at such a moment can realize the savage cruelty of an Italian audience. A hiss almost as shrill as a whistle rent the air. It acted like a signal. Instantly a storm of hisses, cat-calls, groans, boos, filled the house.

“*Cane, birbone! Dog—Thief!*”

The theater seemed suddenly to be possessed with all the brutality of the bull-ring. A few voices, probably those of the Anglo Saxon contingent, were raised in protest. “Silence! Shame!” They availed little or nothing, against the sinister, sibilant murmur that had sent a sharp stab of terror to the very marrow of Alberta’s soul. Meanwhile, Darcy, ghastly pale under his grease paint, struggled to go on. The orchestra leader, with a compelling rap of his baton, had pulled his musicians together in an endeavor to fill the breach. Gasping for breath Darcy persisted nevertheless. Something, however, had snapped in his throat, a veiling hoarseness muffled his tones. His voice shook with the unnatural tremolo of quaking nerves. His tall figure

swayed before the terrific onslaught of that dreadful wave of sound from the auditorium. Valiantly, Alberta took her cues, hoping to sing this horror down, to tide him over. Like a drowning man catching at a straw, Darcy reached out toward her support. It was only a few minutes until the end of the act, by any arbitrary measure of time, but it meant a lifetime to Darcy and Alberta.

Somehow they managed to finish, to come before the curtain afterward, he pointing at his throat, holding it with his hand. The manager apologized. "A cold, etc." Sympathy reasserted itself; there was even a little applause—something with which Alberta could poultice poor Darcy's wounded pride for his heart-rending fiasco.

At the hotel on their return, Alberta could not even look at the uncontrolled demonstrations of his despair. It seemed almost immodest to gaze on a soul thus bared. Through all the tumult of his grief, the reassertions of his vanity, the reproaches to the *maestro*, there pierced now and again something that seemed like a hatred of herself. And yet when it was all over, when the tempest of his impotent grief had expended itself, when his voice, which he had quite forgotten to spare, was nothing more than a hoarse whisper, he crossed to where she sat, limp but lovely in a corner of

a sofa, his eyes bright and yet heavy with the strange mingling of desire and resentment, as if he would assert his mastery, subjugate, break, annihilate in the subtle revenge of too great a passion.

The *Fiera-Mosca*, and the *Secolo* had been more merciful to Darcy than had been expected. They really furnished him with an honorable exit, while covering Alberta with praise. To Alberta's astonishment, the management would not allow her to cancel her contract. Instead they provided her with another tenor. At first Darcy refused absolutely to permit her to continue, but the obligation of money so preyed on him that he consented. It was nice of Darcy to hold so sturdily to that obligation, Alberta thought. If he had not told her of those early sacrifices for his education at Harrow she would have considered his family vampirish.

During her engagement she tried to console him by additional tenderness, hanging more closely to his arm in the Cascine, when people pointed her out as the new singer at the Pergola, looking up at him with her pansy eyes, full of a compassion which she tried to conceal. One day she added to the money she handed over to him an antique filigree bracelet of gold.

"Perhaps your sister has never had one of exactly that sort."

He pushed it away from him. "Keep it for yourself," he cried almost fiercely. "I can't . . ." He turned away his head. "Sometimes I think I will kill myself." She put her hand over his mouth, his arms closed around her.

CHAPTER VII

SHE did not go to the doctor for several weeks after their return to Milan. She had a lurking fear of what he might say. As things were she had forfeited her right to certain joys. She began to see that she would now be definitely the sole protagonist of what had been at first a joint career. An engagement had been promised them in South America for December, but it brought her no compensating joy; her own success seemed only a slap in the face to Darcy. His set grimness was hard to talk against. The conviction was strong in her now that she really could become a fine artist. She fancied herself singing at the Metropolitan, bowing upward toward Mr. and Mrs. Carlion in their box. She would send tickets to dear Mr. Ransome, and to Mrs. Withers. (Strange that they had never answered her letters.) But of all this she dared not speak to Darcy.

The long wrinkles in his cheek that used to add, she had thought, to his distinction had deepened astonishingly. They looked like sword-cuts now, and there was a curious purplish whiteness about his eyes.

Of course they had never really admitted to each other any finality in Ceretti's verdict that Darcy must give up all hope, must stop singing. They spoke only of postponements. The situation would have been unbearable otherwise. But even so, it was scarcely tenable. In spite of this Darcy went thoroughly into the financial terms of her contract for South America. The fear of being without money was an obsession with him.

"I think you had better see the doctor," he said, looking at her one day. "You look run down. Perhaps on the strength of your contract"—his lips sneered a little at the word—"we could go to Salzo Maggiore, and give you a rest."

It was hot, and she felt languid, and somehow heavy, as if lead were in her bones. She had Alessandro fetch her a cab. "Don't come with me," she told Darcy. "I'll be back in half an hour."

The streets were burning dry and hot outside. She thought she must be going to have a sunstroke, for she was no sooner seated in the big chair opposite the doctor than a moment of curious oblivion came over her. She did not know that she had fainted, until she found herself lying on the leather-upholstered sofa. The *professore* was reassuring her, even congratulating her. These malaises are only in the course of nature. They

should not be looked upon in any sense as an illness. He was a big man, with the usual beard of a foreign doctor, unpleasantly suggestive of a refuge for microbes. He had kind eyes, however, and strong, well made hands. "Follow your usual régime, rest a little more, walk a little more, eat a little less."

Her heart gave one wild throb of spontaneous joy that changed almost instantly to pain. Her knees trembled as she tried to rise. Her eyes were suddenly drenched with tears. "It is the emotion," said the doctor kindly. "Let us hope it will be a fine boy!"

The glare crossing the Piazza Duomo was terrific. Queer spots and squares danced before her eyes. She dared not be glad. She knew too well how Darcy would feel. He had told her often enough "artists must sacrifice to their gods." If the voice had only been his!—What an ironic tragedy that she should have found in Milan the voice he had lost, and now she could not use it! The contract had been for December; it was May.

"Well?" said Darcy. He was pacing the room impatiently, his collar loosened; there was that queer pale look around his eyes. She knew that he had turned to drugs but she had never blamed him. The disappointment, the whole tragedy, had been beyond human endurance. "Well?" he repeated.

She tried to tell him, putting her hand to her breast where the words seemed to be caught deeply somewhere, under the labor of her breath. But her face had made clear her meaning before she spoke. He sprang toward her, grasping her wrists vise-like in his long, lean hands—the hands she had been used to admire.

“Not . . . ” he almost shrieked.

She nodded.

He broke into wild laughter, swearing, chattering, screaming. At last he threw himself on the corner of the sofa sobbing hysterically, a wretched heap of despicable misery.

Alberta had sat down during this exhibition of unbridled feeling. She had grown more or less accustomed to such outbursts. But they never failed to shake her, body and soul. She could not manage to become callous. From the tidal wave of his hysteria she detached words: Impossible! A curse was upon them! His voice! Her success! “Farce!” he cried at last. “I, an artist, tongue-tied, dumb, turned into the mere business manager of Madame—impresario to a singer of the second class, and now, not even that! *Père de famille!* Good God! Your voice lost, perhaps, ending up, you as an *ouvreuse* and I as a ticket taker in a little theater!” He was wringing his hands.

She crossed over to him, sat at his side, tried to

soothe his paroxysm with a soft hand on his wavy hair, where a thin streak of gray now lay like a feather above one temple. She had quite forgotten herself. Suddenly he buried his head in her lap. "Forgive me!" he groaned, kissing a bit of lace on her gown.

The next day the question of the contract had immediately to be considered. "We must cancel it at once," said Alberta. To her surprise, Darcy demurred. Why should they cancel it just yet? She must not tell any one, not even the *maestro*. He was going away again to Salzo Maggiore—his heart bothered him—and before he got back something might happen. It often did. Anyway the thing was to keep it quiet and see what could be done. He would take her to another doctor that morning—a woman. Her eyes opened wide with indignant horror.

"Paul," she said. She went and stood before him, and laying her two hands against his chest, looked up at him. "Paul," she repeated, "I *shall* cancel my contract, and I shall *not* go with you to any other doctor. And, dear, oh my dear," she appealed to him, "we must not be afraid, we must take big risks, for big meanings. Why should we be outside life, just because we are artists?"

Darcy did not answer. He only loosened her hands

and turned away, walking toward the window with the melodramatic tread of a tragedian. He often seemed to be acting nowadays, Alberta thought. During the next fortnight this theatrical attitude of desperation became more pronounced. At first she sympathized, tried to console, talked cheerfully, begged him to take her about.

Finally one evening he himself proposed going out. They cut across the Piazza diagonally toward the main arch that led to the central rotunda of the Galleria. He had dressed himself with more care than had been usual with him lately. He looked very handsome, she thought, in his dark blue serge—these English clothes lasted forever and there was always the smartness of the London cut. His presence still exercised for her the old inexplicable charm, and at times she loved him more than she had ever loved him, with the plus of a deep compassion. Her shrine was perhaps empty of the god she had sought there, but in the light of a maturer understanding, she still loved the clay, and regilded it with her unconscious indulgence.

To-night she had tried to look her smartest in a black chiffon. She mustn't let herself go. They still had some money left from the tour, though of course not so very much—the demands of Darcy's family were depleting. She had one secret—she had kept that

three hundred dollars Carlion had given her, and she had put it in a savings bank on the Via Manzini. There were not many people in the Galleria. The air was close, and the clients at the tables looked dispirited. Darcy ordered two ices, and they sat rather drearily without tasting them. They had been there for half an hour when Darcy said to her, "You won't mind if I go back to the pension for my cigarettes? They don't keep Benson and Hedges here." It was one of the pathetic and tacit admissions of defeat, that he now smoked constantly.

"Let me come with you," said Alberta.

"Absurd, stay where you are! We've just begun the evening. Waiter!" he called. "Bring the lady the newspapers. Now don't come trotting after me. Take care of yourself." His tone was lighter than it had been since her visit to the doctor. "*A rivederci.*" He kissed her. She felt hopeful. He was evidently becoming adjusted to the situation. He *must* get used to it. Other singers had had children and continued their careers, Schumann Heink and Madame Louise Homer. Perhaps he could get back to concert work. Now that he was more reasonable, she would say all this to him, though it was such a painful thing for him to talk about. At times she thought he would be glad if she lost her voice, and again he seemed to depend upon it.

She was so busy thinking that she did not even read one column of the *Secolo*. The buoyancy of her youth was still in her. With the despressing influence of his abnormal pessimism removed, she was thinking in her own terms, which were invariably those of courage.

"It is getting late," said a voice at her elbow. The waiter was looking at her rather impertinently.

"What time is it?" she asked. He pulled out a cheap watch. Darcy had been gone an hour! She sprang to her feet, startled. What could be the matter? Her short mood of elation was replaced by a sudden fear that made her tremble. Supposing—he had always spoken of suicide. No—surely it couldn't be that. Perhaps he had taken an overdose of his drug and become drowsy. Even that was tragic enough, God knew.

She flung a coin or two on the table, and almost ran toward the Piazza. "*È bella ragazza*—all the English are mad," grumbled the waiter looking after her.

The concierge was asleep, nodding in her loge, but Alberta, reasonable as usual, remembered the doctor had said "not too many stairs." She awakened her and requested to have the lift unlocked.

"Your husband said the key of the room was on the hook up-stairs," remarked the old woman, adjusting her lace cap. "Also, he forgot a valise in the street, he

was in such a hurry when he took the cab." She held out to Alberta Darcy's small dressing case.

When he took the cab? A natural instinct made her refrain from comment. On the big hook in the upper hall hung the key. She dropped it twice before her trembling fingers could unlock the door. Then she switched on the light. The room lay before her in wild confusion—clothes, papers, scattered broadcast, a big valise was half packed with odds and ends of clothing, the sleeve of a shirt, the link still in the cuff, hung limply out over the floor, a white topped shoe lay on the sofa. The big bed, the *letto maritale*, faced the door. Pinned to the pillow was a large sheet of paper. Somehow Alberta managed to stagger toward it. At first she could not unpin it with her shaking fingers. And when she had finally managed it, she had to sit down for a moment before she could read. Waves of color and of darkness alternated before her eyes. They engulfed her. She collapsed across the foot of the bed. At last, slowly, stopping again and again, unable to focus, she read:

"I have gone away, cleared out, do not look for me. I shall be misunderstood, as I always have been, but I know that there was no happiness for us as things are. Somewhere in Australia or New Zealand, perhaps, I can make my way, possibly as an actor.

"I am trusting to your good faith in telling you what follows. I have a wife and two children in Sussex—not a mother and two sisters. I consider it more generous to inform you in case you have an opportunity for marriage. The ceremony in Jacksonville need not bother you. It was not legal and you are still to all intents and purposes a 'spinster of that parish.' I was not intended for a married man, and I have no intention of 'reintegrating the conjugal residence.' In the circumstances, I have only taken with me what the French call the 'strict necessary.' In the upper drawer of the chiffonier you will find two thousand lire. Forgive and forget me, Alberta. There was no other way."

She could not finish it. She did not know how long she lay unconscious on the *letto matrimoniale*, the strange cross-section of a bad dream forming and dissolving in her brain. A ray of early morning sun across her face awakened her first to the sense of reality. She sat up and pushed back her hair, then at last she broke into sobbing, articulate cries of grief, uncontrolled, but releasing. After that came a desperate calm in which she remained for a long time trying to concentrate her thoughts. There were decisions to be made; she must make them. She felt she wanted to hide. She could not stay here at the Benoni. She went to the drawer and counted the money. There were twenty bank-notes

of one hundred lire each. She remembered her own three hundred dollars in the savings bank, but she did not want to touch that yet. Her knees bent beneath her—she could scarcely stand. A wave of shame swept her, tingling, prickling. Nobody must know what had happened. She *must* go, but where? If she could only crawl into a corner and die. She had come across some veronal tablets in the drawer. The thought of a journey appalled her. She was tired, so inexpressibly tired . . . a wife, children, a bigamist . . . no, her husband; after all she had married him. She buried her head in the pillows, tried to pray. But in her life with Darcy she had lost the old usages of religion, putting her love for him before everything. Her words were wingless, fell short, she knew they would never find God. Again a wave of faintness was upon her. Should she use her money for a passage to America? It would take nearly all she had. Perhaps she could go to Rosie Withers, but she did not want to tell about Darcy. Those twelve little white tablets—three or four would kill her—she wondered if Darcy had left them there as an alternative suggestion. She stretched out her hand toward the dressing table, then drew it back. No, no—not suicide! It would be murder . . . but then, she wasn't a married woman. Perhaps it would be better . . . her poor baby . . . no, no, never . . . before God,

before God . . . one need only think before God, and before God she ~~was~~ married. If only she wasn't so tired. Her teeth chattered. Why shouldn't she hide right here in Milan for a time at least? The town was empty of people who knew her.

La Mamma had gone to visit Variglio who had taken a villa on the Tuscan hills. If the *maestro* had been in town perhaps she could not have resisted confiding in him. She ought really to have done it already. But now—oh, she could never, never write it and besides she must come to an immediate decision. . . . With a little prudence . . . What was the name of that street she had once noticed, tucked away behind the Brera, Via dei Fiori Oscuri—the Way of the Dark Flowers. She had seen that queer, ugly woman who often stood at the corner of the Galleria turning in there only yesterday. She had entered a house where there was a sign, "ROOMS TO RENT."

Her resolution was taken. A knock at the door startled her. "Hot water for the Signor," trilled Alessandro's birdlike voice.

"Leave it outside."

It was the hot water for Darcy's shaving.

The patter of the childish feet retreated down the corridor. She drew in the heavy metal can, then she began to pack. It took her a long time, she had to rest

so often. Finally she had finished. She bathed, changed her frock, stuffed the one of the night before into the hold-all, and rang for Alessandro. "Listen, Sandro," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "The signor was called away last night—a despatch—his mother. I must join him at once, in Paris—in London." Alberta was eminently unskilful at lying. The luminous eyes of the precocious Sandro seemed to express nothing but grief at her departure.

"Call me a cab, I must take the ten o'clock express."

"And the tickets?" said Sandro.

"I—I have them in my purse," she said. "Signor Darcy provided."

"*Va bene*," said Sandro. Many arrivals and departures had made him philosophical.

"Give to the bookkeeper the money for five days of the current week," instructed Alberta. "I have added six francs for the mineral water. And here, Sandrino mio, are ten francs for you." She stopped and kissed him. His eyes, raised to hers, shone with tears and with faithfulness.

"Be a good boy, Sandro," she said chokingly. "Now get the luggage down, and tell no one but the porter, until after I have gone. I will send for my big trunk later. It can come on by *Piccola Velocità*."

The *facchino* and Alessandro loaded the boxes on

the back of the cab. The cathedral shimmered, gilded by the morning sun. She saw it through her tears, as she climbed into the cab.

"*Stazione del nord,*" she ordered, leaning out for a last kiss for Alessandro, who had quite stopped crying, though a large drop still lay like dew on his flower-like cheek.

"*Addio, Sandro mio!*"

"*A rivederci, Signora.*"

The cab lurched forward. Alberta let it cross the Piazza and turn into the Corso. Glancing back and seeing no sign of Sandro, who had apparently returned to his duties in the pension, she bent forward and touched the cabby with her sunshade.

"*Via dei Fiori Oscuri,*" she said. The cabby, evidently a man of the world, betrayed no emotion. He only winked at her with an air of good fellowship and understanding, and turned sharply to the left.

Neither he nor Alberta guessed that hanging on to the cab behind the luggage, and quite hidden from their view, was a tiny figure in livery. It dropped off just as they entered the Way of the Dark Flowers, and remained standing with one eye peeping around the corner of the café that formed the angle of the street, until Alberta had entered the house, No. 16. It waited until after the cabby had lifted off the luggage and

carried it into the doorway, assisted by a drab of a housemaid who had come out with the fare. Then it ran at the full speed of its short legs down the Via Manzoni, and taking a diagonal direction across the Piazza, arrived breathlessly at the Benoni, where it scurried up the stairs to help the cook cut the bread for breakfast.

"Rascal!" growled the chef, adding an extra cuff to the daily measure. But Sandro, preoccupied with the mystery of Alberta's behavior, only stuck out his tongue perfunctorily and without enjoyment, and even omitted the classic gesture indicative of spiritual independence.

CHAPTER VIII

“THREE lire, payable daily,” the landlady said in answer to Alberta’s question, as she stood thin and vulture-like, attired in a dirty camisole, reviewing Alberta imperturbably from top to toe. She asked no questions, and neither offered nor required any reference. A woman of large experience, both personal and vicarious, her business prospered chiefly by reason of the frailty of women and the perfidy of men—or was it the folly of men and the perfidy of women? And she never looked further than the end of her perspicacious nose, provided her tenants could show cash. An arrangement in percentages with a midwife who lived on the floor below had often proved lucrative to both. Generally she did not finish food, but on Alberta’s representation that she had even more money than was on her person (she had shown the bank book of the savings bank as a guarantee), and was willing to pay three lire a day for whatever the signora could spare from her own table, she consented to catering to the extent of one tray. Alberta, who represented herself as freshly arrived in Milan, quite forgot in her inaptitude for the arts of deceit to

square this statement with the display of deposits in the *Cassa di Risparmio*. But the signora, repository of many mysteries, made no exception to her rule of accepting the fictions of her tenants without the analysis of too much logic. She stuck the twelve lire in the vast pocket of an under-petticoat, and remarked that the coffee in the wagon-lits was said to be quite undrinkable. Should Pompilia bring the signora a cup of *café latte*?

Accordingly, Pompilia appeared with a pile of coarse-looking bed linen under one arm, on which was balanced a small Japanese tray, much chipped as to enamel. Alberta had sunk on to the lumpy sofa, and now forced herself to drink.

The furnishings of the shabby room resembled an ill-assorted party at which the guests are of different temperaments, nationalities, and ages. In an effort at a homogeneous effect, soiled antimacassars had been pinned over the dirty upholstery. In color, the nondescript carpet was like greasy soup, or a meat ragout. On the leprous walls hung two lithographs, King Umberto staring fiercely over his rampant mustaches, at his stately consort, Queen Margherita; a crude chromo of Raffel's *Spasalizio* occupied another wall; a broken pot on the mantelpiece held a bunch of dusty pink paper roses. Alberta choked on the coffee, and

Pompilia, the handsome slattern, drank noisily the remaining contents of the cup almost before she had closed the door.

Alberta did not move. The tension, the effort necessary to accomplishment, was over. Tears poured from her eyes. She felt bruised, as if her heart were black and blue. Grief, fear, despair once more overwhelmed her. In her loneliness she cried out for Gogo, for Granny, for Victoria, for Carlion, for all the people who had been kind to her. To Darcy, she could not call. She dared not think of him, it was that way madness lay, and she must keep her wits about her.

Remembering the soothing power of little things, she finally arose and began to put the room to rights. She had quite decided to remain in Milan. She used the bits of chintz which had decorated the room at the Benoni to cover the unappetizing sofa and the dirty chairs. She unhooked Umberto and Margherita, but a dingy square appeared in the space behind the pictures and she had nothing to replace them except two photographs of Darcy; she shoved a trunk beneath her window and spread her steamer rug over it, to make a window-seat. Her nerves were still shaking, and she resolved to take one of the veronal tablets.

Then she slept. . . .

Within a few days she had established her routine,

Her ever present desire to improve came to her rescue. She unpacked her books and began to study regularly. The only possible way out of this situation would be of course to sing again as soon after her child was born as would be prudent for her voice. The interval she could employ in improving her languages, studying French and beginning German. The hot glaring streets did not tempt her by day. She decided to walk at night, not in the brightly lighted Galleria, but in the less frequented *vie* that surrounded the Brera. The doctor had said she must exercise. He was away now, else she might have made him the sole confidant of her strange situation. She decided that she would do so upon his return next month, and ask him to send her to some sanitarium outside Milan. For the present there was no need in confiding in any one, but when it was all over she must invent a story that would be convincing concerning Darcy. She would be strong enough by that time to carry her secret through without hysteria, if fate kept her in Italy. She could not have managed it at the Benoni, faced the inquiring glances, the suspicions and insinuations—even if she could have afforded to stay there.

A few evenings after her arrival in the Via dei Fiori Oscuri, as she carefully descended the ill-lighted stone steps, she was overtaken by the ugly-looking woman

who had first attracted her attention to the Way of the Dark Flowers. She was gaudily and unsuitably dressed to-night in a black velvet skirt and a scarlet silk sweater. Her patent leather, high heeled shoes clicked on the stones as she passed Alberta. Suddenly she turned back.

"Are you going to the Galleria, too?" she asked in Italian, with a decided German accent.

"No, I take my walk in the quieter streets."

"Do you find anything there?" asked the woman. "I am afraid in those dark streets, but the Galleria is not what it used to be." She sighed. "Are you English? French girls are more the fashion here. I am Viennese, myself."

"I am trying to learn German," remarked Alberta, by way of saying something to her strange companion.

"I'd learn Spanish, if I were you. South Americans are 'Kolossal.' Germans are stingy, except with suppers." She nodded and turned toward the Galleria.

Alberta made her way up the Via Dante. The sinister significance of the conversation weighed upon her. She shivered in the darkness of the deserted street and stepped into the deep shadows under one of the archways of the Brera until a man in evening clothes, with a white waistcoat and a gardenia in his buttonhole, had got well past. How dreadful life was!

Fumbling for the key to her room in the dim corridor, when she got back, she almost stumbled over something that she took for a moment for a bundle of returned laundry. It stirred, however, and a soft "ron-ron" proceeded from it. Switching on the light she recognized Sandro. He was not in livery, and wore a corduroy suit of dark green. He blinked up at her, his eyes blinded by sleep, and held out a two *soldi* bunch of faded violets, smiling drowsily.

"Why, Sandro," she exclaimed, "wherever . . . ?"

"I saw you. I understood. *La mia mamma* was abandoned by my father. *Canaglia!*" he added. "I have said nothing, no one knows. I came only to tell you that when you need me, if you need me, I will come, run away, do the necessary to serve you." He looked about. "This is not a *casa per bene*, not a nice house like the Benoni. It is not for you!"

"It is cheap, Sandro," Alberta said, "and I have not much money just now."

"*Canaglia!*" he repeated. He dove down into the deep pocket of his tiny trousers and brought up a chubby fist full of big coppers.

"*Prego,*" he said, heaping the lot into her lap. She did not refuse them any more than a madonna would snuff a candle placed before her altar. Instead, she bent over his curly head, praying that her own child

might have the manly heart of a Sandro Boncinelli.

He came often after that evening, and accompanied her on her walks.

"Better so," he would say, strutting proudly as if ready to annihilate an army of brigands.

To Alberta's astonishment Fräulein Elsa (Pompilia had told her her name, accompanying the information with a great many shrugs and innuendoes) knocked one day at her door.

"I can't seem to sleep to-day, and I've been thinking about what you told me, that you wanted to learn German," she said. "I was a governess once. It's awful, the days when I'm not so dog-tired that I sleep all day, and this is the dull season. Would you like me to give you a few lessons? *Sie sind mir ausser ordentlich simpatisch.*"

Alberta was delighted.

"Why do you have a child if you don't want to?" said Fräulein Elsa one day. "There's no need, you know. Did you have a real affair, or was it just . . . ?"

Alberta had been the unwilling recipient of Fräulein Elsa's confidences many times, the pitiable and sordid story, not unusual, but none the less terrible. She had never reciprocated, however, with any revelations of her own. "I was married," she said hastily. (It was

the truth, wasn't it, before God?) "And I want my baby. It's all I shall have to live for, and work for," she added. Fräulein Elsa leaned across *Otto's German Grammar* and the copy of *Nathan der Weise* that lay between them. "May I kiss you?" she said. "You must let me help you when the time comes."

The hot days were very long in the dreary room, and brave as she tried to be, Alberta found that Umberto and Margheritā, the *German Grammar*, and Fräulein Elsa could not keep her thoughts away from that dangerous dark spot in her soul where she dared not look. It held remembrances that she was forever dodging, that she could not face, lest she go mad with the grief and humiliation of Darcy's abandonment. In an effort to divert her mind she took to visiting the Brera. The long, cool gallery where the shadowy Luini Madonna looked out in the peaceful, contemplative mood of their consummated motherhood, somehow soothed her. The innocence and purity of these frescoes, the little St. Johns, the infant Christs, made her feel and think as she wished to feel and think before the birth of her child. The sordidness of the surroundings of the Via dei Fiori Oscuri, the beflecked sentimentality of Fräulein Elsa fell away; her spirit floated over Umbrian Hills, under a clear sky.

She was sitting one day, her hands lying in her lap,

her eyes resting on one of the frescoes, when she became aware of a long English back between her and the picture, a lady and two children, a boy and a girl, had detached themselves from a group of Cook's tourists who were being hurried along toward the *Sposallizia* and had lingered before the Luini.

"Sweetly pretty, don't you think, Doris?" the lady was saying to the girl, who had long curls and a shirred Liberty frock of primrose silk.

"Do look, Paul," she turned to the boy, a handsome lad in an Eton suit, who stood somewhat sulkily aside, evidently bored, and longing for cricket or tennis. "You must make the most of your trip," continued the lady. "It is probably the last we shall ever have. Everything is so much dearer than I had thought."

The boy turned. He had a long pale face, waving hair and a cleft chin.

Why—whom did he look like? Of course—Paul. She had said "Paul." Was it? Could it be . . . ?

"Come, Mrs. Darcy," called a voice from the next *salle*. "You mustn't miss Albani's *Dansa degli Amorini*."

Alberta swayed, her head swam. Paul! Darcy! His children, his . . . Her heart beat wildly. She must get out, go home. Home? The Via dei Fiori Oscuri! Her teeth were chattering.

"Are you ill, signora?" asked the custodian who sold photographs near the entrance.

"Get me a cab, please," she said.

She thought she could never get to the top of the stairway.

Fräulein Elsa came, or was it the Medusa, her hair was up in pins; then the padrona, and presently an old woman, and then a chattering crowd. A bear was strangling her, a tiger was tearing her heart out. Then there was a man, his head was bigger than the Duomo. . . . "Darcy! Darcy!"

Then nothing, nothing—for a long time, nothing.

When she awoke her arms lay limp and thin along the sheet. She could not raise her head. It was night, and a veilleuse was burning in a glass of water on a table near her bed. It cast a big shadow on the wall of Alessandro, seated at the foot of the bed, looking at her. He rose and brought a cup of water and a spoon, and slipped a cool liquid between her lips. She was tired, and fell asleep again without asking a question.

It was Fräulein Elsa who told her about it. She had been ill, ill unto death, and there was not, there never would be . . .

"After all," said Fräulein Elsa, furtively wiping a tear, "what would life have done for her? I suppose my mother was glad when I was born, and would have

cried to lose me, but she has wept far more since then, though God be thanked she lies these many years in the churchyard bei Anhalts Hof. Let me give you your drops."

In the strain, incident to her prolonged illness, Sandro had, it seemed, turned state's evidence. La Mamma, the *maestro*, every one had heard about Darcy's abandonment. No one knew, however, that she was not married to him. The doctor, and Signora Ceretti, moved to more than her usual rabid feminism by Alberta's tragedy, insisted that she be transported as soon as possible to their apartment, where they had a free room at the back overlooking the court. *Il maestro* would attend to reestablishing her voice, and in return she could help the signora with her correspondence.

La Mamma also offered her sanctuary in her establishment.

"*Come mai!*" she exclaimed, drawing her damask skirts about her on the occasion of her first visit during Alberta's convalescence. "In a house of this kind—terrible! Had you no confidence in La Mamma that you ran away? That *canaglia* of a Darcy. I even thought at first that he had not married you—a seducer of the third order. Always he was to me, antipathetic, without heart. If the *maestro* will take care of your voice

it is perhaps better after all that you go to his signora. She is kind, though not agreeable. They say she feeds him poorly, the sure sign of a woman who has never had lovers."

The final act of Alberta's Milanese tragedy came a few months later. The voice—the golden voice—was no longer there. Poor Ceretti wept when he and Alberta finally acknowledged the fact to themselves.

"And for what, *Dio mio?*" he said, striking his forehead. "For Darcy! a *scappato*, a miserable good for nothing! And he steals me my voice!"

Ceretti always alluded to the voices of his pupils as if they were his private property, "My voice, which was one in a hundred, what do I say, in a thousand!"

Signora Ceretti in whom feminism had not yet eradicated superstition, daily placed candles before the shrine of St. Anthony of Padua, hoping that Alberta's voice would be restored like a lost rosary or mislaid bracelet. The house was a house of mourning for weeks.

"*Poverina*," lamented the Mamma over at the Benoni as she related Alberta's history, now incorporated among the classic legends of the pension.

"Perhaps later with rest and care," the *maestro* would begin, trying to console Alberta, though unable to deceive himself. "Meanwhile you can fall back on

your violin." Finally he got her an engagement to play in the big beer hall in the Galleria. At Gambrinus there was always a woman's orchestra made up of pretty girls. Alberta, paler, thinner, more ethereal, was lovelier than ever.

"You are an artist, you know, not only a singer. We can arrange for violin lessons, as you had at first intended," Ceretti encouraged her.

But in Alberta the mainspring was broken. There was no longer any ardor of effort. Milan was hateful to her, and so it came that when after a few weeks at Gambrinus an impresario who wanted some girls to play in a big café in Havana, offered her a contract, she decided to take it.

"It is not so much your playing," he told her. "You reek with personality. We might call you that—Miss Personality—on the programme." He pronounced it "progrum." "Can you dance?"

"Yes," she told him, she could dance, and to prove it, executed a few steps of the *Paloma*.

"That's the stuff," he said, "they still like romance in Cuba."

A few days later she sailed for Havana.

Of her life in Milan she took with her one affection—Sandro. She had lost her own child, and Sandro was a friend as well as a child and a little man besides.

She wanted to keep him. She consulted La Mamma and they made a trip to Pavia to see his mother, after Alberta had persuaded the impresario to promise him a job as bus-boy or page in the café in Havana. She rather exaggerated his capacities in recommending him so, but she felt that Sandro would play up and he was at all times very decorative. Signora Boncinelli made but a feeble resistance to giving up her son. Sandro would be better paid and could send her five lire more a week. No doubt he would grow rich in America and come back and build her a house with a bay-window. That was what had happened to Maria Tosselli when her boy returned and he had brought her a gold wrist-watch as well. Signora Boncinelli gave not only her consent but her blessing, and la Mamma having granted Sandro a holiday to make his farewells the whole thing was presently in order.

"I'll see to it that the poor little kid gets at least a decent place to sleep," thought Alberta. "And not such long hours, and something to eat besides polenta and spaghetti!" Granny, she reflected gratefully, had always looked out for the girls' diet. If only Alessandro had been her very own!

CHAPTER IX

THE Havana season is fed largely by the jaded overflow from Palm Beach and Miami.

Conventional dissipation de luxe, though relaxing physically, morally and mentally, is at best anemic and often boring. Moreover these resorts are glass houses, transparent to the argus eye of the great American press, and hence inconvenient alike for the staging of transient affairs or of grand passions.

In Cuba, you can throw discretion to the winds. Whether you bring a sweetheart with you or find one after you get there, is of course optional, but solitude, except *à deux*, is almost unknown in Havana. In short, it is the happy hunting ground for delinquent husbands, disaffected wives, and college boys curious of "life."

Two years after Alberta's arrival in Cuba, James Dunscombe and his friend, Dick Harvey, were seated one evening before one of the small round tables of El Gato Negro. The young men were exceedingly unlike, a fact which had cemented their friendship. James's admiration for the high spirits of his debonair classmate suited perfectly the easy and selfish good

humor of Dick Harvey, who, on the other hand, felt a patronizing sort of affection for poor old Jim. He admired his intellect without envy, as something that was splendid in some one else but in no way desirable for himself.

Despite his good looks and gay manner, Dick was the unfortunate victim of rivalries in a family disrupted by divorce. His parents vied with each other for his affection, pampered, cajoled and bribed him. If his mother gave him a sloop, his father retaliated with a polo pony; if his father increased his allowance, his mother doubled it; if he wished a vacation in Europe, or a trip to South America, extra funds were forthcoming from both sides. Harvey, Senior, had wanted him to read law at Columbia; his mother wished him to go in for literature at Oxford. He had made a few rhymes for the *Lampoon* and she fancied that he was a genius. Dick had a preference for doing neither, or at least for taking time to decide. "A fellow should know just what he wants to do before he goes in for it. A bad get-away from the post isn't any good. You know that yourself, father," Dick would argue. And to his mother—"Molly darling"—it was one of his subtle forms of flattery that he invariably addressed her as if she were his pal rather than his parent. "A man must see life before he can write about it, live, you know!"

The gaieties of Villa Miraciel, his mother's villa at Palm Beach, had palled upon him. There was not freedom enough. There were clocks and more or less fixed hours for engagements, and people, sometimes even ugly or old, that must be dealt with politely. He had induced James, who was taking a brief vacation from Johns Hopkins with the Carlions in their Sunset Avenue cottage, to join him in an escape. And Jim had been quite willing. As usual, he felt himself in the way, an inconvenience to Susan's plans. He had always been an inconvenience. He knew that. He did not fit into the carefully composed mosaic of her life, was hard to seat at table, played execrable bridge and had never learned to dance. He had not been surprised when she urged him to accept Dick's invitation. Occasionally it occurred to Susan that she ought to be proud of her son. His professors now considered him remarkable, a scientific genius, but his abilities were not available for consumption in her circle, his coin did not pass currently. People in general and girls in particular, did not care whether he had isolated a germ or was on the way to discover a cure for leprosy. Johns Hopkins might declare him brilliantly promising; he presented to the ordinary observer a shambling, awkward exterior, and while the report of his scientific researches encouraged Susan to hope for a future celebrity, advantageous to her salon, it had

never melted the icicles from her heart. She bade him "goodspeed" with a relieved good will when Dick finally carried him off, on the small yacht his mother had lent him for the trip.

El Gato Negro, a cabaret of the second class, chiefly patronized by Cubans and South Americans, bored Dick. The silhouettes of black cats, pierrots and pierrettes, that decorated its walls, were only a naïf and old-fashioned attempt at sophistication. The dancers offered nothing novel to a young man whose theatrical education had been the *Follies*, and who had taken his B. A. from Florence Mills and the *Plantation Revue*. He was about to suggest that he and Jim go on to one of the little theaters where they gave Zarzuelas, short pieces with a tobasco-like "pep," when Jim, who was holding the programme very close to his near-sighted eyes, read out a name.

"Miss Personality."

"That sounds a bit different," said Dick. "We may as well have one more go at it. Same old thing," he added a moment later.

A dark slender girl was dancing the tango with a young man who might have put Maurice on his mettle had he known of his existence.

"Rotten," said Dick. "Miss Personality has no temperament. Come on, let's go."

But Jim did not hear him. He was leaning awkwardly forward, his figure bent almost double, his near-sighted eyes strained and starting as he stared across the dance floor.

"Well, if you feel that way about it!" laughed Dick, sitting down again.

James made no reply. The girl had left her partner. She had thrown aside the great Spanish shawl which had covered her and she was dancing alone, her arms and bosom bare, her dress a wisp like sea mist, swaying back from the long line of her thighs as she floated in and out among the tables that edged the floor.

"By jove, Jim, you're not such a bad picker after all," exclaimed Dick as she came nearer.

Her blue-black hair bound her head closely like a ribbon of moire, the eyes in her pale face had a purplish hue. Like pansies, thought Dick. His heart gave a wild thump—his circulatory system was easily affected by beauty.

"God," he cried, "that's the most fascinating woman I've ever seen!"

Jim had risen, throwing over his cup of coffee with his elbow as he did so. He made a stumbling step forward.

"Alberta, Alberta!" The name came clearly without his usual stutter, as if his heart spoke for him.

The dancer stopped short before their table. She looked startled, not altogether pleased. Then suddenly she reached out her hand and her laugh rippled, her red lips opening on her white teeth like a pomegranate on its seeds.

"Why, James!" she cried. "And you've upset the coffee just like in the old days."

James, too, laughed happily. She had not seemed to be making fun of his clumsiness, but rather alluding to it as if it were an endearing peculiarity.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Personality?" Dick pulled out a chair. He was never exactly backward with women. The girl was ravishing, prettier than any of the beauties of the Broadway revues, different, too.

"Miss V-Varley," corrected James, introducing.

Alberta hesitated. It was quite in accordance with the instructions of the management that the dancers should join appreciative clients at their tables. And Alberta had acquired a surface hardness during her two seasons in Havana that enabled her to joke easily in several languages, with the somewhat questionable mongrel clientele. Sometimes she even enjoyed it—she only fell short when it came to non-professional hours.

Her first instinct when she recognized James had

been flight. How should she account—and yet she felt so glad, almost happy! There was so much that she wanted to hear about that magic circle of “nice” people in which she had once been briefly included and to which she had so ardently aspired.

She slipped into the proper seat. Fortunately, James’ next remark reassured her.

“Where,” he began. Then with the tact that springs from fine instincts, he did not complete the question. “We were so sorry never to have heard from you. Carlion always said he thought you would write.”

She understood. She had somehow always suspected that Darcy had not posted the letters. She was glad of it, now. It would make it easier to go on. James went on talking. He seemed to be trying to pave the way for her. “I’ve been visiting the family at Palm Beach. Mother’s hot on a new villa . . . ”

“What’ll you take to drink?” interrupted Dick. “A highball?”

“Champagne, please. Pol Roger sec, 1911,” replied Alberta promptly. It was good for the trade to have men order wine.

“Attaboy!” cried Dick. “I see you know how to get the best out of Havana.”

She drank quickly enough when the wine had been brought, glancing with rather artificial coquetry at

Dick, but when he had filled her glass for the second time, she let it stand untasted except for occasional quick little gulps. She had turned toward Jim and seemed almost to have forgotten Dick.

The new Jim, Alberta was reflecting, had grown up to his especial brand of ugliness. She liked the look of him. His big features, grotesque in a boy, were almost imposing in a man. Time has a trick of evening things up. His stutter was observable only occasionally; she remembered that he had said that he would overcome it, and it was evident that he had overcome more than that.

"Carlion hates Palm Beach," Jim was saying. "Mother had to invent an art society to keep him busy, and he's organizing a one-man show."

"And what have you yourself been doing, James?" she questioned him.

Dick interrupted again, this time in generous praise of his friend. "Jim won't tell you," he said, "so I will. Besides automatically becoming a multi-millionaire at twenty-one . . ."

"Shut up, can't you," said Jim.

"Curses, by the way, on my improvident ancestors who have left me at the mercy of mere parents. Besides being, as I have said, this impressive plutocrat, Jim is pretty hot stuff on the scientific side. Johns

Hopkins is crazy about him. What's the damned bug you've isolated or invented?"

James flushed. "There's one good thing about scientific research," he said seriously, "even if a fellow doesn't discover anything, at least he can close up false trails." He spoke gravely, and with a certain authority. Again Alberta thought him immensely improved.

He had asked nothing about the interval since they had met. She wondered if he were avoiding it purposely.

"I've been here two years," she said finally, thinking it best to throw a bridge over the chasm at once. "Perhaps you did not know that Granny died and Victoria got married. I was all alone, so then . . ." she hesitated . . . "I went to Italy to study violin, but I got ill there and couldn't go very far. This offered," she made a gesture toward the silhouetted decorations of El Gato Negro, "and I took it." There was no use of her going into the past more deeply than was absolutely necessary, since the Carlions knew nothing of what had happened between Darcy and herself. And why should she mention a voice and a career that had diminished to the vanishing point? "Oh," she added, "I forgot to tell you about Sandro. He is a little Italian boy I brought back with me from Italy. He

is eleven years old now. I got him a job here as page to take the coats and sticks.' It makes it less lonely for me, having him. In the summer we go to Miami. I dance and play at one of the hotels that is open all the season."

"Miami must be a hell hole in summer," commented Dick.

"Oh no," said Alberta; "Sandro and I go to the beach for swimming. We sit in the shadow of the white windmill. I hear him his lessons and we read Italian."

Alberta did not add that they generally ended by talking of Milan, *il maestro*, *La Mamma*, while Sandro built sand castles in distant imitation of the Duomo or the leaning tower of Pisa. Sandro had the temperament of an artist, not of a scholar. Nor did she allude to her occasional revolts against the disillusioned present with its drab outlook when she felt that she would do anything, make any compromise with decency and honor, if only she might break away from the sordid routine of this lower theatrical order.

"It's getting late, and I live way down O'Reilly. It's been wonderful, seeing you again." She rose, holding out her hand.

"Can't we run you home in the car?" asked Dick. She noticed for the first time that Jim's friend was

handsome, blue-eyed, well built and strong for all his slenderness in his smartly tailored clothes.

"Or better still," he was saying, "come out on the yacht for a cocktail."

They were walking toward the cloak room. The other guests left.

Sandro, in the *vestiaire*, glowered at Dick ominously as he handed him his hat, the last one left upon the shelf. His duties were over for the evening.

"What ails the infant matador?" laughed Dick.

"It's Sandro," she said. "If you don't mind, I won't go on the yacht this evening. I'm always tired after dancing." She often wondered if she did not owe to Sandro's scowling chaperonage more than she did to her own courage. Or was it simply that the men she had met, sodden brokers whose gospel was the ticker, sinister *rastacouaires* of the South Americas, did not offer enough? She was ambitious. She would have liked the best. Money, of course, but money plus! Granny had irrevocably transmitted to her a taste for the grand manner.

Jim's bulging eyes scanned her thin face gently. "Of course you shall go home," he said. "We'll tuck you in somewhere, young man." He put his hand on Sandro's shoulder with just the right gesture. "You will lunch with us to-morrow instead."

Dick's low roadster stood long and shining in the moonlight outside. The three sat very flat on the front seat, their legs stretched out in front of them. James held Sandro in place on the running board.

"We'll call for you at twelve-thirty," said Dick, as they stood on the narrow sidewalk in front of her lodgings. "Good night."

"Good night."

"The Signor with the eyeglasses is *molto simpatico*," commented Sandro. "He wishes well to thee, Alberta."

Dick was silent for some time after he and Jim had climbed back into the car. He turned on the exhaust and raced for the dock at top speed.

"Who is she, anyway?" he asked finally, when they were seated on the deck of the yacht.

"A girl I used to know," was all that Jim chose to answer.

Alberta had a right to her own reticences, he thought. She should tell Dick as much or as little as she chose. What she had been in the old studio days, what she had become in the interval, mattered nothing to Jim. "Now and a thousand years from now," he remembered the phrase, and he did not change it. No girl would ever care for him, he knew that well enough. His experiences at dancing school and college proms

would have instructed him if he had not always known it. Well, he must take it out in isolating a . . .

"You needn't be so beastly reticent," said Dick. He got up and stretched himself. "Well, I'm going to turn in. So long."

CHAPTER X

EVEN in the noonday it was delightfully cool under the gaily striped awning on the deck of the *Mango*. Alberta, leaning back among the cushions sipped her coffee, and reveled in the spotless brilliance of the little yacht. She enjoyed material things, when they were elegant, not just shoddily expensive. The luncheon had been delicious, the French chops especially. Meat in Cuba was generally so appalling. Sandro had been invited, too. He lay at full length after the manner of his countrymen, in the sunshine that flooded the stern. The lighthouse on Cabanas, and the white and blue houses of Casa Blanca gleamed dazzlingly. Havana opposite, shimmered like a parti-colored ribbon along the shore. Other boats lay near the yacht: a big white steamer of the American Fruit Company; several smart yachts; two or three weather-beaten ships, suggestive of distant adventure on the high seas. How lovely it all was for people who . . . she would not even think, only live in the hour. The two young men had been very attentive in a nicer way than South Americans and Cubans, whose flattery was always cloying, like treacle, with a nasty undercurrent suggestive of *quid pro quo*.

Dick had gone below to look for some snapshots which he had taken of a cock-fight. James leaned across to her.

"Listen, Alberta," he said, stuttering this time quite as much as in the old days, "if—if I can help you ever in any way, p-please don't misunderstand me—I mean if you don't like—I mean the Gato Negro doesn't just seem—you see, I'm the only kind of a fellow a girl can . . .

"I couldn't find 'em at first," Dick had reappeared in the gangway. He threw a cushion on the deck and sat down at Alberta's feet to show her the photographs. And he rather monopolized Alberta the rest of the afternoon.

It became evident almost at once that Dick was giving Alberta a rush. A boat was kept flying between the yacht and the dock with notes in which he proposed every conceivable way of seeing her that was compatible with her evening engagements. The races fitted best with her leisure and his tastes. She liked dashing out at break-neck speed along the Malacon, through the Vedado to the track, where he always had a good box. Dick's wide acquaintance among trainers and jockeys took him often to the paddock, and James and Alberta had a chance to talk.

"Whatever became of that tenor, I wonder," Jim

said one day. "What was his name? Darton—Darcy. Carlion thought him a fearful bounder, but I rather suspected mother of having a crush on him in a mild way."

Alberta felt the blood recede from her cheek. She hoped her voice was steady as she said, "I wonder."

"I picked a twenty-to-one shot in this race. Jenkins gave me the tip. I put on a dollar or two for you, Miss Varley." Dick had rushed up from below three steps at a time. "Hell, what a bad actor!" He followed the start through his glass. The horse came in first, and Dick was elated.

Alberta gradually, in a fragmentary sort of way, learned of Jim's ambitions. "It's the only career," he said, "the finest in the world, too, the one where a man can really take up the torch from the previous generation and pass it on when he has finished. The arts aren't in it, with their renaissances and decadences! Art is individual, but science! Having"—he hesitated—"having more or less of a bank-account is going to help a lot. In the first place it leaves me freer than most fellows, and then as soon as ever I really specialize I'm going to shell it all out in the line of laboratories and clinics. Thank God, father didn't hold me down with a trust fund for life—and it costs me very little to live; I loathe swank. I guess that's because I'm a misfit

where style is concerned! Do you remember my bum laboratory on Forty-Seventh Street? Funny, wasn't it? Well, I wish you could see the one at Johns Hopkins. I give you my word——" Here would follow a long description of technical equipment or an account of the recent scientific researches of the men James most admired, ending with a prophecy of the possibilities in future discovery. During these recitals James' plain features were lighted with a fire of fanatical enthusiasm, until they appeared almost handsome.

Jim meant every word he said. But he also meant more than he said, much more. He meant that to him this pursuit of science must take the place of everything else that came to other men so easily, to take or leave. His very sense of balance and proportion taught him this. He saw himself as an incongruity, biologically speaking. Scientists are inevitably perfectionists. He glanced toward Dick, stretched on the sand at Alberta's feet, splendid as a young gladiator—the wide shoulders, the deep chest, the strong thighs, the perfectly arched insteps—and then at his own spindling, knock-kneed shins, dwindling into big, flat feet. Ugh! It was unthinkable.

Sometimes instead of going to the races, they all went for a swim in the small close bay of Marianao.

It was on the return from one of these expeditions

that Dick, seated on the deck, smoking in the twilight in a silence intermittently broken, suddenly said, "Jim, I intend to marry Alberta." For a moment there was no reply. The two men's cigarettes glowed like twin fire-flies in the dark. Jim was glad that it hid his face. He could not keep the muscles quite steady. It is one thing to give up, but it is quite another to give over. Of course, he had never really hoped, even for a moment.

"Do you know anything against it?" continued Dick. "Not that I'd give a damn if you did."

"I know only that to me Alberta is the one woman in the world, and that I'd give my soul to be just the sort of a fellow that you are." He had blurted it out before he knew it.

"You don't mean . . ."

"I don't mean anything," James spoke more lightly, "except that I'm not a marrying man." He achieved a rather forced laugh. "Wedded to science, you know, and all that sort of thing. We future Pasteurs and Curies have to make sacrifices. Go in and win."

And Dick required no urging. Expeditions of all sorts became even more frequent. Jim stayed on the yacht now, pretexting that he must catch up on some scientific reading, and left the situation free for Dick to operate unhampered. At first he had thought of

leaving Cuba for the North at once, but upon reflection he decided that Alberta might need him (his presence acted as a sort of unofficial chaperonage), and that he would stay until the volatile Dick should be definitely declared. He scarcely doubted her reply. Dick was splendid, even though uncertain. He wondered if he would make her happy. He *must*, he thought—no one could fail Alberta. He had always hoped for himself, in an indefinite sort of way, that he would find her again, or some one just like her, but then, there *was* no one like her, of course. And when he had found her, for a moment he had thought . . . but it was only for a moment. He fancied that her gaze flickered with a sort of reluctance to look at his ugliness, though her eyes were always kind. He spent a good deal of time with Sandro. He loved children, and had a natural paternalism, the result, perhaps, of affections denied at home. Alberta noticed this. Jim must marry a woman who could give him children.

There are many excursions to be made near Havana, and Dick and Alberta profited by most of them. Dick picked them out of the guide-books that he had never glanced at heretofore. He was already making love to Alberta in a way that he hoped was unmistakable. As a matter of fact Alberta was not sure of its significance, but Dick was amusing, good-looking, al-

together charming with his casual gaiety and laughing nonchalance. And above all, there did not seem to be in him that unpleasant beast in ambush that had looked out at her from so many men's eyes. Yet she did not feel the real understanding between them that existed, for instance, between her and Jim. With Jim she was quite at ease; perhaps it was because she had known him longer. Strange that he had never made love to her, even a little. Since that first afternoon on the yacht he had made few references to the past. Evidently that fluttering kiss behind the arras had been only an instinctive, boyish reaction to beauty. She had represented the primeval woman to him. In the light of a wider experience she saw this. Of course he was still unattractive, especially in contrast to Dick, but he had individuality, was no longer negligible, and despite his clumsiness, supremely a gentleman. Though not assertive he did not seem shy any longer.

That phrase of his, "now and a thousand years from now," she had never forgotten it, but it could not really have meant anything. Men were all the same, even the ugly ones. No doubt he was just like the others. There was no use counting on anything deep or lasting. She could see very well whither Dick was tending. Well, why shouldn't she have some fun as she went along? Keep the bracelet, for instance, that he

had sent her from a big jewelry shop on Obispo. She had tried its effect in front of a distorting mirror in her room, that made her features seem on the bias, but the circlet had been wonderfully becoming to her white arm. She thought of Victoria's axiom: "To get money, get next to money." Where were Victoria and her Bert, she wondered. Often and often she had vainly searched *Zits* and *Variety*, hoping to see their names listed. Perhaps they were dancing under another team name. If Bert had made good at the Winter Garden, it must have been while she was in Italy. No one whom she had asked seemed to have heard of them.

As for herself, the bracelet, in remembrance of a month's flirtation with an attractive man, was all she could hope for, probably. The glamour was gone from life long ago—Darcy had taken it with him. Fortunately, Americans did not drive hard bargains, like the Latins; that was one comfort. She hoped that she could cheat a little with this jolly handsome boy, without incurring unpleasant obligations for herself. Men's feelings did not matter, they had none that were permanent. If it had been James, she would have acted differently, partly because of her affection for the Carlions. But it wasn't James. Dick was certainly very fascinating, and Jim preferred any fine new microbe to her society, she reflected, slightly piqued.

It came, one afternoon when Dick and she were sitting in the Miramar at tea. They had been dancing. The diamond circlet on her arm shone through her thin chiffon sleeve. *Do It Again* drowned the chatter at the other tables.

"I guess I've got the soldier's psychology, I need a band to help me march to battle," said Dick, leaning across the table. "I've something to say to you and you know what it is." His ruddy face was just a little pale as he went on.

Alberta shuddered. She had hoped to keep the thing just as it was, pleasantly iced for polite consumption.

"Can't we cut out that sort of thing?" The eyes raised to Dick's were not quite the pansy eyes of old. It was as if a torrid sun had burned the dew from them.

"No, we can't." He looked at her fiercely, like the strong young animal he was. "No, we can't, and it's just this, Miss Alberta Personality Varley (God what a name!)" Dick was heartening himself by a flippancy that he did not really feel. "I want you to marry me," he gulped.

Marry him! Alberta had not been prepared for exactly this denouement, would have feared it if she had, yet instantly the temptation leered compelling at her and she knew she would yield to it. Dick observed her hesitation.

"Yes, marry me, and why not? If you think I don't know my own mind, ask Jim whether I didn't say to him the very first crack out of the box that you were *the* woman, my woman!" Dick spoke boldly, but for the first time in his life without the usual confidence that he felt in the invincible power of his desires.

From his cradle to the present day, Dick had never been denied anything he wanted. His mother, a woman of sycophantish affections, had picked up his rattle, paid his debts, lied to his father about his peccadilloes with the completely immoral indulgence that proceeded partly from a desire to stand well in his affections, also because his nature resembled her own, and she forgave him as readily as she would have excused and justified herself.

"Marry me?" repeated Alberta. Here it was again, the opportunity, the door ajar. She had not even pushed it, and everything that she wanted, that Granny had wanted for her, lay just on the other side. The Harveys! She knew that name through the papers, knew what it stood for. Aunty Withers had included it in her recitals of the doings of the great world many times. Then blindingly there rose before her like a smoke screen, shutting out the vision of a splendid, care-free future, full of opportunity, the miasma of her past. Darcy! Milan! She would have to tell him,

risk telling him even about the child. Then he wouldn't want her. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands, agonizing under the cover of the table.

"But your people, I'm not your class." She temporized feebly.

"Class? How do you get that way?" said Dick. "Class? There isn't such a thing. Once upon a time, Alice in Wonderland, when your ancestors lived in England, or in Spain, or wherever they did live, I don't give a damn, class may have existed. But when you are my wife, and I take you to Palm Beach or New York, or even Newport, you'll see what rot that sort of stuff has become. Nothing to it. You're much more my idea of a queen than Mrs. Masters of Manhattan, or Queen Arabella of Boobania! And I'm going to marry you." Her silence had reestablished his confidence which had flickered only for a moment. "Say you love me, but even if you don't, I'll marry you just the same." He put his hand over hers. She got up.

"I can't answer, not to-night," she said. Her face was drawn and pale.

"You don't need to. It's settled."

He took it with a high hand, but he paled under his tan. Suppose after all she should refuse him? He wanted her, not to be hidden in corners, after the man-

ner of a "kept woman" on the West Side, where their guests would be a few semi-detached husbands, questionable girls, fat Jewish brokers, or movie sheiks. He wanted her, but he wanted to flaunt her and her beauty in the teeth of tottering traditions. His "set" would go down before her, he knew. Presently she would be the rage, the fashion, received everywhere in a world that asked for little except beauty, and for few credentials provided it was amused. Of course, there was the family, but mother had always given him everything, and father didn't matter anyway. A large part of the cash came from her side of the family. Mother was not of the old-fashioned sort that still talked about "aristocracy." (Fatal, that! He recalled stuffy seasons in Tuxedo where he had visited an aunt.) Mother's was the kind of social instinct that rose to new necessities, the snappy kind that did as it willed, invited whom it pleased. She would see at once that Alberta would be an asset, not a drawback.

"I'll be here with the ring to-morrow at twelve-thirty," he said with an assurance that he did not feel, as he left her at her door.

All night long Alberta stared into the dark. After all, need she tell Dick? If she kept silent, how would he ever know, and Alessandro was faithful. Most stage women had had an affair or two before they

were her age. No doubt he had accepted that much by implication. She closed her eyes, resolved to sleep on a final decision. But in a second they were open again. With a start she realized that she was compelled to be honest. How would she bring herself to cheat a man who perhaps wanted children! Of course, she argued against herself weakly, he didn't seem the type who would take on responsibilities; he was too gay and casual. He had never been interested in Alessandro like Jim. Fate had acted for her so far, why should she try to be wiser than her own luck? Why not let that feature slide? There would be ways of accounting afterward—— Again she relapsed into comparative peace.

There was so much on the other side. How could she go on with her present life, defrauded of everything: a career, children, marriage? At least she had a right to one thing; she felt powers within herself. Once out of these surroundings she would improve. She felt confidence, given opportunity. No, no, she could not let it all go. And Dick, she was fond of him, his pleasant buoyancy, his big boyishness. She could help him all the more because she did not love him as she had Darcy. That sort of love paralyzed. She had followed Darcy. Dick would follow her. One seldom saw a couple who walked absolutely side by side. She

would make up to Dick in other ways for the lack of children. Then all at once she knew absolutely that it must not be done in that way. For her own sake she could not endure it, couldn't go through the long, long lie, the sense of failure to herself. She resolved to tell. Exhausted she fell into a confused sleep.

Finally, toward dawn, she got up and sat at the window. She began to back up her voluntary decision by hard reasons of common sense and expediency, learned in the school of her Cuban experiences. She refused to sentimentalize. The pendulum of her tired mind swung to the other extreme. After all, she had known from the first that she was going to accept Dick and the thing to do now was to play for high stakes, cards on the table. This time there should be no catastrophe, after her marriage was consummated. She would tell Dick about Darcy and the child to-day, and she would also insist that he tell his family. Then they could take it or leave it. That much should be right about the thing. Great love did not greatly matter. She liked him as much as she ever would anybody. She did not seem to have much left to love with, that was all. She wondered what Jim would say.

Dick was attractive to most women, she could see that by the way they looked at him at the races. She knew enough about passion-driven men to feel reason-

ably sure that her confession would be made at the moment when the high tide of desire would sweep away all hesitations. But she wanted more than that; she wanted to be placed firmly on a basis of truth with him and with his family in the beginning. They must receive her with their eyes open, or not at all. If they *did* receive her she would show them that she was equal to their position, and she would make something of their Dick, for them too, not of course a Jim, but still something.

These thoughts still swirled and criss-crossed in her mind as she slipped her head through her one-piece frock and pulled her stockings to an unimpeachable tightness over her slender legs. Her small close hat was vastly becoming, and after she had slung her beaded bag on her wrist she ran down-stairs, quaking but determined.

She found Dick waiting at the door. She had never asked either of her friends to come up to her room, nor for that matter, had they suggested it. He helped her into the tonneau and turned toward Marianao. It was not until after they had swept the curve of the Malacon and passed the dusty glaring villas of the Vedado that, without turning toward her, he said, "Well?" (Dick was surprised at the quiver in his voice. This time he cared a lot.) "I've got the ring."

Alberta was steeling herself. It was difficult, almost beyond power of accomplishment to say it. Even he might . . . She had thought of waiting until they got back, but that would not do either. Things would have only gone farther by that time. Now—she must do it now.

“Dicky . . .” the words came haltingly over her dry lips, “I have something to tell you, something that may make you change your mind.”

Dick spluttered inadequately the usual platitudes expressive of the eternity of passion—“He would always . . . There never could be . . . There never had been . . . etc., etc.”

But Alberta interrupted him, she felt her courage ebbing. She must hurry or it would fail her completely.

“Dick,” she began again. She had meant to tell her story skilfully, had even rehearsed it in imagination, giving herself the best of it wherever she could, beginning at the beginning, but omitting sordid details. Now, somehow she couldn’t make it happen in that way.

“Dick”—would she ever get started, she wondered.

“Dick, I ought to tell you—I’ve been married, only he was a bigamist. I had a child, and I can never have another.” There it was, out—the very worst of it first. She had not even led up to it.

Dick's hands on the steering wheel grew suddenly white in the intensity of their grasp.

"Tell me about him," he commanded hoarsely, tortured by the natural jealousy of a young male for another man, ignoring the question of the child.

Then at last she achieved it, bit by bit, in halting fragments at first, and then more fluently, her heart beating wildly. Even he might think the circumstances too damning. She had a sensation of impending doom. These two friends of hers would go away now and leave her,—shove her back into the ugly—for it was ugly—life of El Gato Negro. How could she ever bear it again? But when she had quite finished, Dick stopped the car in the scant shadow of a tree that edged the links of the golf club. Turning toward her, he put his arms about her almost tenderly, *l'amour tendre* was not characteristic of his nature. Then without a word, he caught her to him with all his fundamental fierceness, kissing her wildly. And youth answered youth, and nature would not be denied.

"And so, Dick, you don't care? You want *me*, anyhow?" she whispered. In that moment her gratitude had all the warmth of Love.

The ring, a huge sapphire, weighted becomingly her long white finger. He had persuaded her that they were absolutely engaged. Dick ate his lunch with his

left hand, so that he might not be forced to let go hers.

"And you will write and tell your people everything—you promised, you know—this very evening."

"Of course I will," answered Dick. He wished she would not harp on that feature of it. She meant more to him than any child, and he was in the confident mood of all lovers, yet the situation did present difficulties. Oh well, mother would play up as she always had, he guessed. That evening, however, in the solitude of his cabin he wrote and tore up half a dozen letters. The final draft, which he edited carefully, omitted several important details.

CHAPTER XI

“FROM Dicky!” Mollie Harvey took an envelope from the pile of letters that lay on the small silver tray beside the single cup of black coffee that she allowed herself for breakfast, before her morning dip.

It was eleven-thirty, and the sun from the patio cut bright patches in the cool shadow that fell on the tessellated floor of the arcaded terrace. She leaned back luxuriously in her wicker chair. Cyril Maidstone, who had wheeled down from the Poinciana as usual to join her, sat at her feet. They were both in their bathing suits. Geisha girls and mousmees promenaded in riotous confusion over the gay chintz of Mollie's short tunic. Green slippers tipped her feet, and a kerchief, also of green, was knotted fetchingly over one ear, almost covering her “bob.”

“You've got surprisingly pretty knees, Mollie,” remarked Cyril. “And God knows, shins are no novelty.”

“Shut up,” said Mollie, smiling at him encouragingly.

Cyril, who was the wrong kind of handsome, had

been frequently assured by Platsky and other film magnates that should he fail with widows, he could always make Hollywood. His brown arms were sufficiently muscular, and he had the straight strong Greek neck and the curly hair that are inevitably associated with love and villainy. His regular profile, now raised toward Mollie, would have served adequately to advertise a new brand of cigarettes, or to illustrate the latest fashion essay in "What Men Should Wear."

"It's about a girl or money, I suppose," said Mollie, cutting her son's letter with the handle of her coffee spoon.

"Synonymous," commented Cyril.

"Fortify me with a cigarette, will you, Bobo?" Mollie called Cyril "Bobo" for no discernible reason, except that women invariably rechristen what they love.

He held out a case that had been lying beside him, and gave her a light from the initialed gold briquet she had brought him from Paris. She took three puffs, blew a few rings and applied herself to the letter. Suddenly the cigarette landed in the middle of the patio.

"Good lord," she cried. "This is . . . Oh, heavens! How ghastly—he wants to marry." Her hand flew to her breast.

"Annoying but not unusual," Cyril spoke calmly. "Who is she?"

"I don't know—he writes so badly. It's all criss-cross. Let me see—Havana—God!" She put the tiny embroidered breakfast napkin to her lips, her eyes moved from side to side across the page, following the writing. She sank back, handing the letter to Cyril.

"Dearest Mollie,

"You are the most understanding woman in the world, and I've met the most wonderful girl in the world, and the whitest, too." [Methinks he doth protest too much, reflected Cyril.] "Wait until I tell you—she won't even consent to a definite engagement until you have given your blessing." [Sly minx, thought Cyril.] "I want you to see her. She'll make Palm Beach sit up and take notice. Now, the thing for you to do, Mollie darling, is to send her a wire at once, asking her to visit you. I think I could persuade her to come. You'll love her. She's awfully well educated, speaks several languages, and has lived abroad a lot. I'm no good at letter-writing, as you know, or else I'd tell you more about her. But that will be quite easy when we meet. I shall expect to hear from you by quick message as soon as you get this.

"Your loving son,

"DICK.

"P. S. And I shan't come back without her, ever. So it's up to you. Wire at once."

"The blackmail of the affections!" remarked Cyril.

"How dreadful of Dicky," groaned Mollie. "He doesn't even tell her name. Goodness knows what she is. He's much too young. I was married when I was sixteen, you know."

Cyril smiled faintly. The kerchief which bound her "bob" had become displaced. It showed the scars made by a five plane operation in face lifting last season in Paris.

"Do help me, Cyril dear," she wailed. "Dick is so high-strung. He might do anything, marry her or kill himself, or something. It's awkward, too, just now," she went on. "I mean about you and me. I've never told you, Cyril, but Dick has never liked you. Just jealousy, of course, which is natural, and some ridiculous idea about the slight difference in our ages. I've been putting off telling him that we are really going to be married."

Cyril was silent for a moment, still holding the letter in his hand. It occurred at once to his eminently practical mind that the facts deplored by Mollie might greatly strengthen his own position. Cyril had always feared Dicky's opposition to his inappropriate marriage. The young autocrat could, at the very least, make it uncomfortable, perhaps even endanger Cyril's plans.

Mollie's was a weak and vacillating nature. He per-

ceived at once the opportunity for advantageous trading.

"You can't oppose a boy like Dick too directly," he said slowly. "You have to play him like a tarpon—let the line out before you pull it in."

"Oh, Cyril, it is too wonderful to have you near to advise me," cried poor Mollie. "His father was always so unsympathetic. Do you suppose I ought to go to Cuba?"

"Let me think, darling." Cyril clasped his knees with his brown hands and looked out meditatively into the patio. But his fine eyes did not note the flame of the hibiscus, nor the clustering richness of the bougainvilleas nor the sapphire radiance of the sky. He was bringing his best powers to bear upon what he felt might be the most crucial moment in his suit for Mollie's millions.

"Why not let her come here, as Dick suggests?" he said finally. "The simplest way is always the best. You can't antagonize Dick—you remember the last time! He'll kick over the traces and tell you about it afterward. You could look her over much better here than in Cuba. If she proves to be out of the picture, Dick will see it when he compares her to—well—to such a woman as you, Mollie."

"How dear of you, Cyril, to say *me*." Mollie did

not want to go to Cuba. It would mean leaving Cyril. Of course she trusted him—still, a man alone in Palm Beach—it was almost like throwing him to the lions, or tigresses. The easiest way appealed to her. Mollie had always followed easy ways. Her atrophied conscience suggested only a feeble resistance. “But wouldn’t that be binding—like recognizing the thing officially?”

“Not in a place like Palm Beach. It’s all too casual, no one notices anything.” Cyril gave her instep a fond pat. She felt her scruples receding. “However, if you have a better suggestion to make . . . Of course go to Cuba, if you think best. With the Moxons and Cynthia Dare I dare say I could while away the time somehow.” Cyril stretched himself lazily, like a strong young beast of prey. It was part of his stock in trade to be insistent only in love-making. The usual indolence of his manner made his ardors more convincing.

He had risen and was looking down at her, with the violet eyes from which he seemed able to switch the light on and off at will. “I don’t want you troubled,” he said gently. “I have it!” he cried suddenly. “Why not ask Susan Carlion to invite her? That would place the girl in the eyes of the community, without connecting her so definitely with Dick. How’s that? I know now they need me at Geneva!” He

struck an attitude, pulled playfully at an end of the green silk handkerchief, and finally bent back Mollie's head and kissed her full on her painted lips, so quickly and gaily that she had not time to answer more than "Splendid!" She was easily persuaded to what she secretly desired.

"I'll write the wire for you at once, darling." If Susan declined to help, he reflected, they would still find a way. And Mollie must not be given a chance to change her mind.

"You are so resourceful, Cyril," she pressed his hand. "I'm exhausted. Do attend to it."

He stepped inside one of the long doors that opened on the terrace and stooped over the tiny Buhl desk in one corner of the big room whose windows gave upon the sea. Although, as Mollie's secretary, he had long been accustomed to luxuries, he never failed to notice and value them as things now essential to him. "*Le superflu, chose si nécessaire*," he quoted mentally, dipping his pen into the bronze ink-well by Benvenuto Cellini. The telegram read quite simply:

"Extend my invitation to your friend and come at once Stop Apologize not sending wire direct to her Stop You forgot tell name Stop Heaps of love

"MOLLIE."

They could decide definitely in the meantime where to lodge the young lady, he thought. He rang for the butler, a stately, elderly person who resembled the Bishop of Durham. Applicants for situations in Mollie's household were required to submit full length photographs before being granted an interview. She objected to flat feet or a squint. Simpkins, who had neither, received the telegram blandly, though he disapproved of Narcissus-like young men in bathing suits.

"Get that off at once, quick message, will you, Simpkins?"

"Quite so, sir," said Simpkins.

Cyril sprang out through the long door, and seizing Mollie by the hand, dragged her half running down the steps to the lower terrace where the wheel chair stood waiting beneath an arch. A panting negro pedaled them down an avenue of palms toward the golden strip of sand which prolonged the exclusiveness of Mollie's estate to the borders of the ocean.

"My little girl must never worry. I am here for that." He pressed her fingers. The water was delicious. Cyril dived through a wave, carrying Mollie with him. As they came up on the other side, clinging and laughing, she had quite forgotten her responsibility. Mollie, if she should reach seventy, would

never live to grow up! The splendid young merman at her side, however, remembered his morning's work with keen satisfaction.

"Let's ask the Carlions to lunch at Bradley's," he suggested as they sat drying on the sands. "We can talk better without the servants." Cyril liked to be seen in public with Mollie. It lessened the chances of a frightened retreat on her part at the last moment.

They both loved gambling and usually spent the afternoon at roulette. The little round tables and the chairs with the green legs looked very attractive on the veranda of the famous gaming house. Both women were diversely smart in dresses that expressed their opposite personalities, in the same degree that a monogram expresses a full name. Susan's distinction was emphasized by her gray chiffon with touches of jade, and a cloak that added to her length of line. The sophisticated simplicity of Mollie's pleated skirt and soft blouse of beige crêpe was almost juvenile.

"They say it lasts three years," reflected Cyril, reviewing the renovated features of his fiancée in the searching light reflected from Lake Worth. "She's astounding."

It had turned out that they were only three at lunch. Carlion had gone up beyond the inlet to paint.

"He doesn't like Palm Beach, you know," Susan said. "It's too artificial. He says Spizner invented it, did better by it than God, really. He thinks the municipality should put up a monument to him and his architecture."

"It's just as well that we're alone," Mollie discarded preliminaries. "Cyril and I have got a favor to beg of you."

"You're not going to ask me to be a flower girl, are you?" Susan, whose humor was rather elephantine, was in high spirits. Spizner, who fitted his lady clients with houses as easily as another might with frocks, had assured her that she could have her housewarming in three weeks. "Certainly," said Susan, when Mollie had finished the explanation of her difficulties. "Certainly, I shall be glad to put her up." Susan rose the more obligingly to the situation because she did not for a moment forget that she was a newcomer and that Mollie's house was conceded to be one of the most amusing in Palm Beach. Her dinner list included nearly every one of note. Only the people of the Tuxedo group looked at her a little askance, and even they had been known to capitulate on occasion. She was the real center of the Prince of Wales's set, and it was a foregone conclusion that she would be able "to put Cyril over" when the time

came. Susan, heretofore a little formal, rather feared being classified with the frumps in these surroundings—Mrs. Gordon Smith, familiarly known as the Gorgon, who still left cards and served only one round of cocktails; or Mrs. Abercrombie Morgan, who went in for afternoon concerts and “stringed quartettes.”

Susan realized the necessity of being in the vanguard. Besides, she had a certain sympathy with Mollie’s caprices. Fortunately she had been able to make her own impulses coincide with her dignity (Carlion represented one of them), but she understood Mollie and secretly sympathized. The girl, the visitor, would not be much in the way; it would only be a matter of lodging her. No one ever ate where he slept in Palm Beach. Odd that Jim had never written of Dick’s little *affaire*. Then she suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to answer his first letter from Havana.

After luncheon they strolled into the big gaming room, hot and airless in its bleak, windowless shadow. Mollie was addicted to “hunches” and always had a “system.” To-day she intended to “pyramid” on the date of Dick’s birthday. She staked Cyril liberally and sat down on her lucky chair at her favorite table. Susan had evaporated into the sunlight. She had an appointment with a decorator, and didn’t like gambling.

CHAPTER XII

AS THE Havana Special pulled into the Poinciana Station, Dick looked up and down the platform. Rolls Royce number two, that usually met trains, was nowhere in sight.

"Darn it!" he ejaculated. "They must have counted on the Express being late."

Alberta, standing under the station shed, felt strange and embarrassed; she wished that she had not consented to their arriving together, but she had been urged into it by Dicky, who could be very persuasive when he chose.

It had been Jim who suggested the solution that met her wishes half-way. Dick and he had gone to Tampa on the yacht, and she had followed with Sandro by steamer. The journey had been rather a problem in every way, and she had not known just what to do with Sandro while she should be at Palm Beach. But Jim had again come to the rescue by taking the boy north with him. They had become great friends, and Sandro, with the Italian passion for affectionate service, was looking forward to acting as page in Jim's lodgings. Jim knew about Darcy now, too. Alberta

had told him with a strange pain in her heart. But he only said, "You're Alberta. Circumstances are just . . . just like the clothes of the soul. You take them on and off. There's nothing really changed."

"After all," she thought, "he does distinguish me from mere organic matter!"

Alberta had been both astonished and delighted at Mollie's telegram. That she should have capitulated so readily seemed miraculous. She attributed it to the good offices of the Carlions, who had evidently spoken well of her. She could not guess that Dick had never mentioned her name in his letter, and that Jim had not written to Susan in a month. Now, however, facing the situation, she had misgivings.

"Let's take a chair instead of a motor," she proposed. "It looks such fun, and some one told me there won't be any in use by next season."

"Right-o," said Dicky. He was a little nervous himself, now that the showdown was at hand.

"Are you sure you wrote everything?" Alberta's gloved hand lay on his coat sleeve. She whispered so that the chair-man should not hear.

"Everything," he answered, lying like a gentleman. There was no possible reason why he should ever tell his mother, or any one else, that miserable Milanese story. Even the Carlions did not know. Jim had as-

sured him of that. The facts had staggered him a moment when he had first heard them. Other people might not even believe it. (It was none of their damned business anyhow). It had been awfully white of Alberta to tell him, though he almost wished she hadn't, sometimes. One could drive most of the remembrances of it away, but that blackguard haunted him, yet of course what she had said about "starting fair" was true. Not that he had felt it necessary to inform her about the check that he had enclosed in a farewell letter just despatched to a charming young lady from South Carolina who resided (with her mother) in a bungalow apartment on Riverside Drive. It would clear out his bank-account for the moment, but Mollie would come up to the scratch. He suspected her of a secret pride in his conquests. He knew she would have hated a son like Jim Carlion, for example. He wondered if Jim had ever cared really for any woman.

It seemed a long distance to Villa Miraciel, though the sudden twilight had its beauty for lovers. The chair-man wheeled doggedly along the ocean drive. Alberta was trying to imagine what Dick's mother would be like. Dick was not good at description, and had only furnished her with the meager information that Mollie was a good sport, and a regular fellow.

He had added that she was a small woman, and quite pretty. Alberta pictured her as daintily ethereal, with a gentle dignified merriment and a kind bonhomie. It was evident that she must adore her son. Yet Alberta grew cold with fear at the anticipated ordeal of a first inspection. Of course Mrs. Harvey must be endlessly kind, or she would not have accepted the situation. Alberta felt less unfitted for taking her place among the people whom she was about to meet than she had in the old studio days of the Carlions. She had read, and thought, and above all lived. She knew that she was no longer crude and awkward, and she meant to show Dick's mother how sincerely she wanted to be a good wife to him, and fit harmoniously into the different scheme. No doubt it would take time to learn the technique. She remembered the refinements in the mutual intercourse of the Carlions—the balanced poise and fluency with which Susan had treated every incident in that world of finer instincts and gentler manners.

The opportunities would be big, too. The people she would meet would be people of prominence, men and women whose wealth or whose power were a national influence.

The sky was very clear and cloudless, and the ocean indigo and flat; the chair began to follow the line of a

high, blue stucco wall. Purple bougainvilleas clustered over it. They drove in through a wrought-iron grille which stood open under an arch. A long avenue of palms stretched before them, and at the end on a slight rise of ground, lay the beautifully straggling Villa Miraciel.

"That's the house," said Dick somewhat obviously. The entrance door, barred by another iron gate, was closed, but when he rang a big bell at the side it was scarcely a second before two footmen appeared in the vestibule. One paid the chair-man, and the other preceded them up an inner flight of steps toward a room on a higher level.

"Madam was not expecting Mr. Richard until later," said the footman.

As he spoke, he raised a heavy curtain of red canvas. For just a moment they were the spectators of an extraordinary scene.

At the piano, pounding the keys with mechanical precision and glancing back over his shoulder, sat an extremely handsome young man. A beautiful mulatto woman, the color of fine bronze, beat her hands together as she sketched the steps of a dance, her long bare legs crossing and recrossing. But it was the third figure in the group that arrested Alberta's astonished gaze, the tiny figure that came prancing for-

ward, head down, legs intertwined in a frenzy of motion. The heels of the red slippers barely touched the floor; the muscles in the neck stood out in the unnatural effort of movement; the lips were set; the thin arms pendulous and dangling. A wisp of hair hung limply over one eye; the little body in its transparent "slip" of black chiffon was childishly small, but there was something in the articulation of the bones that was old, sinister, macabre. It reminded Alberta of an engraving of Dürer's called *The Dance of Death*, which she had once seen in Carlion's studio.

"Mo' pep in de right leg, Mis' Harvey," cried the negress, her big teeth gleaming between lips painted on a gray powdered face.

"Mother!" cried Dick. A pang shot through Alberta, a pang of pain and disillusionment. Dick's mother! Why, even Granny . . . even Mrs. Withers . . . She turned away her head. But Dick caught her hand, and advanced with her into the room. It wasn't just the way he would have chosen his mother and Alberta to meet. Why hadn't Mollie seen to it that they were alone?

"Mollie!" he called again.

The young man at the piano stopped short. The dancing figure in the transparent black chiffon slip, flesh colored stockings and red shoes, remained in the

dislocated pose of a dilapidated polichinelle. The manner of their arrival had been a distinct contretemps. Cyril, rising from the keyboard, bridged the uncomfortable gap.

"There must have been a mistake about the motor. We sent it to West Palm Beach to save your crossing the bridge on the train."

Mollie had pulled herself together, even a delinquent lady may have social technique. Advancing toward Alberta, she took her hand between both of hers. "My dear! My dear!" she cried. "We must like each other." She kissed Dick, and slipping in between him and Alberta, thrust an arm through each of theirs, drawing them farther into the room.

"A harmless version of the eternal triangle," she laughed. "Do forgive me, I'm a sight." She rattled on, pulling a bright scarf that had been tied loosely about her shoulders upward toward her throat, conscious, as always, of relaxing muscles. "To-morrow at the same time, Miss Johnson," she turned to the negress. "Now let me look at you." She held Alberta away from her. "You are lovely, my dear. Isn't it absurd Dick never told me your name. Alberta? How pretty. I'm so sorry about the mix-up with the car; they must have changed the time table. Miss Winkle, my housekeeper, was to have

met you with a note. You are to stop with a friend of mine at first,—propriety, you know. This place is a hot-bed of gossip. The car would have taken you there at once. And I was coming down in all my pretties to call on you before dinner, after I had had a little talk with Dick. Not that it matters, but I'm sorry to have had you condemned to ride in one of those dingy old hired chairs. Perhaps you will stay here a few moments with Cyril—Mr. Maidstone, I mean, while I go and change. I won't be a moment. Dicky, come with me. I can talk with you through the door of the boudoir."

Alberta moved toward a deep sofa piled with cushions. She did not fancy the man Cyril; he was too much like her dancing partner in Cuba. The particular devil that Alberta had seen now in the eyes of so many men looked at her through his politely veiled gaze.

"What a beautiful room!" she said, wishing to be impersonal.

"I've noticed that myself in the last ten minutes," replied Cyril. Sometimes his taste for philandering got the better for a moment of his splendid reasoning powers; but he never let it run away with him.

"Let me be your friend, my dear," he said. "It's a difficult position, arriving like this among people you

don't know. Especially . . ." he laughed, "when one's mother-in-law dances the Charleston. Let me help you where I can."

Alberta looked at him again; it was rather nice of him to want to help her, she thought, but caddish to laugh at Mollie.

"You will be constantly here with us, you know, even though you stop with the Carlions."

Alberta gave an exclamation of joy. "The Carlions? How wonderful! I'm so fond of them!"

"You know them?" Cyril was surprised. He had difficulty in pigeonholing Alberta in any of the familiar social compartments. Meanwhile Alberta was deciding that Dick's mother and Mr. Maidstone could not, after all, be as intimate as she had thought at first. It was evident that she had not shown him Dick's biographical letter of her past, else he would have known of her acquaintance with the Carlions. She changed the subject by asking if she might not look out into the "glorious patio."

"Let me show you our house. We are very proud of it." He accented the possessive pronoun. Just what did that mean?

At leisurely intervals the huge room where they sat was swept by the wind from two waters, like the breeze wafted from an indolent fan. The blue tiles

of the floor were covered intermittently by big black rugs. On the walls a gay pageant of lords and ladies, the work of a great painter, presented a curiously modern version of ancient Spain.

"My father was a matador," remarked Alberta.

Cyril looked down at her, startled. "I didn't know matadors were ever grandees," he said. "And he must have been a grandee at the very least, Donna Alberta."

"He wasn't," said Alberta. "My grandfather on my mother's side was a clown."

This time Cyril burst into a laugh. "You're having me on, I see. But you're very amusing. Keep it up and you will be a huge success in a place where every once in a while people find out that they can't live by whisky alone. Let me show you the tea pavilion."

The tea-room was done in red lacquer and gold; heaps of thick cushions piled high along one wall served instead of chairs. Their colors ranged through luscious orange and pinks and vermilions, to strident greens and daring blues. Cyril threw open another door. Dim pictures hung high above the paneling of dark wood. There was no table visible in the center, though Spanish chairs stood against the wall. Cyril touched a button. "Stand where you are," he said. Suddenly a section of the polished floor detached itself, dropping downward like a trap-door. There rose in

its place, fully laden, a magnificent table, decked with flowers and a lace cover.

"It's a copy of one that Louis XV used for his *petits soupers*. It isn't really set, you see. We are dining out to-night." Alberta had gasped; the whole thing was like the *Arabian Nights*.

All at once Cyril turned to Alberta, facing her. "I don't know who you are, or where you came from, and you don't know me from Adam, but I can help you and you can help me; if you are wise you will believe me. Shake on it! Is it a bargain?" He stretched out his hand.

Alberta was not especially fond of bargains which she did not thoroughly understand. She realized, however, that it would be impolitic to decline any offer of friendship. A voice at her elbow obviated the necessity of her giving him her hand.

"It's too disgusting that we should be going out to-night," said Mollie. "I'm sure we'd all far rather stay here and chat. And I simply loathe leaving you, even though Dick . . ."

"But I telephoned the Moxons that we were bringing Miss Varley and Dick." Cyril had done nothing of the kind, but he intended to in a few minutes. The more they made this affair of Dick's irretrievable, the better for his own prospects. The Moxons' was to be a huge

dinner. Palm Beach hospitality was elastic; besides Polly Moxon had a *faible* for him; he knew that she would not refuse him. Dick looked at him gratefully. Ordinarily he would have resented the implication of power and proprietorship in Cyril's manner. But in this emergency he was glad of his help.

"That's awfully white of you, Maidstone," he remarked.

His conversation with his mother in the boudoir had not enlightened her very much about Alberta. He had related briefly that she had studied singing in Milan with the great Ceretti, and had unfortunately overstrained her voice. He added that she had once posed to Carlion for a portrait—lots of musical students did that sort of thing in order to earn money for lessons. Dick had always known how to manage his mother, who could stand disagreeable truths only in homeopathic doses, small enough to digest and forget as soon as swallowed.

"Jim says she was always a favorite with Mrs. Carlion, and used to come to tea and luncheon at the house constantly," he told her. And Mollie had seized with avidity upon this reassuring account of Alberta's status.

She was therefore glad to learn that Cyril had made arrangements for taking her son and the girl to the

Moxons' dinner. A glance and a word had shown her to be more than presentable. She was even disquietingly lovely in her plain dark frock, and her voice and inflection had been perfect.

"We mustn't keep you any longer, Alberta," she said. "I may call you that? You must be tired, my dear, and I've got to take my massage. Fortunately the Moxons have dinner at the sensible hour of nine-thirty. It helps to shorten the evening. The Cadillac will run you down to the Carlions—I'm so glad they're old friends—drop Cyril at the Poinciana, and bring Dicky back here. I'll call for you at eight forty-five. Make her wear her prettiest dress, Dicky dear. *Au revoir.*" She drew about her the fluffy mass of lace and chiffon that composed her peignoir, and half ran across the court, blowing a gay kiss as she went. "*Adieu,*" she called. Now that she was dressed she looked far younger, Alberta thought, even desirable enough to account partly for Cyril, though even at that, it seemed rather ridiculous.

CHAPTER XIII

DICK dreaded Alberta's meeting with Susan and Carlion. He was not quite sure how it would go off, and in effect he could see, as they were ushered on to the wire-netted, lamp-lighted piazza, resembling an ice box, where Susan, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, awaited them, that her astonishment at sight of Alberta held considerable perplexity. Alberta, however, was quite without self-consciousness.

"It's Alberta, Alberta Varley. I suppose your son wrote to you," she said quite simply. "I always remembered how kind you were, and the Benefit and all."

Her simplicity had given Susan a cue, and her manner, coldly cordial at best, was no more frigid than usual. Susan hated being behind the times. She was astonished, but if this was her friend's idea of a marriage for her son, why should she object? The democracy of the passions was reconstituting society. This arrangement would be no harder for people to accept than Mollie's own prospective matrimonial venture. Life was lived in detached compartments nowadays—a series of lives, really. People discarded their former existences as they would a chrysalis; marriages were

episodic, venture and adventure. These thoughts passed rapidly across the background of Susan's mind as she talked pleasantly, if with a certain caution, about their former acquaintance—a luncheon, a tea, the Benefit. She did not know just how things stood; she would have to warn Carlion to be tactful. But almost immediately he stepped from the long window on to the veranda. He had come in from a studio he had improvised in the garage and stood for a second, peering at the two guests. People often thought Carlion physically near-sighted; in reality he was mentally far-sighted, the eyes of his mind did not always focus on the objects that were nearest to other people. In a second, to-night, his gaze came back from whatever horizons he had been concentrated upon—possibly the Rue du Val de Grâce where a woman's figure bent over a 'cello. . . . He held out his hand to Alberta.

"Why, it's my little Scottish Signorita! Names are nothing to me, not even symbols—was it Alberta? You ought to have been Conchita. Our picture, you remember—it was bought by the Luxembourg Gallery. *La Porte Dérobée* I called it finally. Well, well, where have you been, and how? We may again be collaborators."

"Gladly," said Alberta. "And, you know, I've still got the three hundred dollars." It was as if she had

seen him yesterday. They met on the old peaceful basis of his naturalness and her simplicity. If only, she thought suddenly, he doesn't begin to talk about Darcy.

"Miss Varley is our house guest, Carlion," said Susan, who had been talking with Dick. "I forgot to tell you. She is a great friend of Dick and Mollie."

"So much the better for Dick and Mollie," said Carlion. He was not interested in detail.

"Would you care to go up to your room?" Susan suggested. "Your trunks arrived ages ago. If Dick can tear himself away . . ."

"Your mother was too sweet to me," whispered Alberta, following Dick to the door. "Please thank her." Gratitude for her reception had almost done away with the disagreeable impression caused by the Charleston.

Dick bounded down the steps, two at a time; everything was going surprisingly well. There didn't seem to be any particular kick coming. Everybody knew all that was necessary now. He didn't see that there was any point in going into the Darcy episode. After all, that concerned only himself. He wished it hadn't happened, but there were plenty of girls right here in his own set—Betty Falmouth, for instance, a girl who was almost a professional house guest at Palm Beach, who always needed silk stockings and money to pay her

bridge debts. Alberta at least had loved honestly, thought she was married. Alberta! He glowed at the thought of dancing with her to-night in the moonlight.

The Moxons' party was triplicate—a musical, preceded by a dinner, and followed by a dance. In this manner, they celebrated annually the anniversary of a wedding which had meant little or nothing on his side, save a desire for the power that his wife's fortune would give him, and on hers a recognition that being married to an able man is the best spring-board whence a pretty woman can leap gracefully into the social whirlpool. The Moxons, Mollie Harvey, the Carlions and their friends, scarcely ever frequented the more public gathering places in Palm Beach, except on very special occasions such as a fancy dress ball at the Everglades, or the opening of some new club. They left them to the less consecratedly fashionable, or to benighted persons indifferent to boundaries or curious about types.

To-night Polly Moxon intended to outdo herself. The moment was favorable. Two royalties who really looked like royalties were visiting Palm Beach. (Last year one grand duke had had the appearance of a waiter, and there had been a princess that resembled a

charwoman.) Besides the royalties, there were so many titles on hand that even expert as she was she had been obliged to refer to Mrs. Price Post's book on etiquette in order to seat her guests properly. A woman she knew had been quite ostracized only the week before because she had allowed an Italian prince to outrank an English lord. It was horribly perplexing. Cyril's telephone message about Dick was something of a nuisance, but though she was perfectly sure that Cyril did not kiss and tell, she had always noticed that blackmail and curly hair went together. It wouldn't upset the important part of the seating anyway. The ambassadors were all arranged for. Miss Varley—the name sounded rather well—a bit English! Cyril had said she was pretty. Senator Bixbey had come in this afternoon on a late train, and wasn't provided for. She would fit in very well—that Shelton girl was so dull. She changed the cards without much bother, and ran up-stairs again.

The immensely long narrow table ran the full length of the pergola that bordered one side of the patio. Down the middle stretched a band of crystal grapes, white, green and yellow, illuminated by an electric wire that passed beneath them. From a big shimmering bowl rose a fountain-like jet of champagne,

bathing continuously the ice-cooled peaches that filled it. Polly, in a gown of emerald and pearl beads, one arm loaded with bracelets, sat in the middle of the side of the table. The Prince was on her right, on her left the ranking ambassador. Opposite her the Prince's sister, a Grand Duchess, was appropriately flanked by Moxon, representing big business interests of the younger generation, and Mr. Cunningham, the leading financier of the colony, whose power determined the destinies of more countries than any reigning monarch. Polly, surveying the table, commented mentally that the assemblage was of an almost flawless quality. Of course there was Cyril Maidstone, he did not really belong—but he was accounted for by Mollie's caprice, and his own extraordinary charm. She didn't know anything about Miss Varley, but the girl was deliciously pretty, though a little odd; and the Senator seemed so entranced that he neglected the terrapin, imported expressly from Baltimore.

The Prince clinched in his perfectly good left eye the monocle that had seen long service, from the Folies Bergères to the Kunst Theater. In an impeccable English accent acquired from a tutor and a year at Oxford, he asked: "What is the name of that wonderfully beautiful girl the second from the end—the one with black hair and the white dress?"

"A Miss Varley," answered Polly. "One of my friends brought her."

"Miss?" commented the Prince. "That will not be for long. What a pity—virginity is so attractive." He had a narrow jaw and thick red lips, and was rather like Philip IV of Spain. Trained to the automatic politeness of kings, he meted out a full proportion of attention to Polly and presently, when the table turned, was equally obliging to the "important" Mrs. Cunningham on his right. His habitual good manners sat so lightly upon him, however, that he had leisure for observation. He decided that there was really but one woman present. "Miss Varley," Mrs. Moxon had said. She was rather like an old picture of the famous Baroness Vetsera, the heroine of the mysterious romance of Prince Rudolf. He had seen her photograph, affectionately autographed, in one of his grandfather's palaces, in a Residenz Stadt, where he had visited as a child. He would meet Miss Varley as soon as the boring obligations of the dinner were over. Evidently she was unknown to these barbarians. He had heard Mrs. Carlion speak of the middle classes, as if all Americans were not middle class!

"The Prince seems to be taking notice," said a gossipy attaché on Alberta's left when the Senator, finally immersed in an unusually fine mayonnaise, had released

her from the recital of the latest bill he was trying to introduce on the "floor." "*Les Rois en exil* are really a scream, aren't they? I invested in a thousand shares of the new development at Deep Sea Turrets to-day simply because a firm of promoters have got the Prince to sign a contract that he will live for a few months each year in a villa that they are building expressly for him. It's a great publicity idea. They'd commercialize God if they could, you know. The house is to be a copy of the Prince Waldemar's palace at Cintra, the one where he kept the dancer Serafina de Taragona, the one who turned out to be a spy. It was in all the papers a few years ago."

"Won't he find it rather dull over here without spies and intrigues and things?" said Alberta.

"Well, better be bored than beheaded, you know. There's a legend that they tied his grandmother into a sack and threw her into the Bosphorus. I can't see that he ought to miss anything except booze, and some such or other will stake him to that. Social bootlegging is as remunerative as real estate in another way. That's how B. LeRoy Richards got into the Social Register. He's the fourth man down from Polly."

"The flabby one with the bald head that looks like a raw oyster?"

The young man laughed. "The same! When he

first came down here he picked out the less prosperous hostesses—the ones with the good New York names, poor Knickerbocker bank-accounts and no looks; the ones who obviously needed men for their parties. Every time they asked him to dine, he left a case of champagne with his card. Crude but effectual! Every one goes to his parties now, and he's been edging into the snappier sets by staking the Honorable Violet Streatham at Bradley's. They say Lady Beeches Burnham let him in for twenty thousand last month and he paid for having her face lifted besides. But he's a good sport and asks for very little by way of interest. Personally, I'd want a *pousse café* from the lovely Violet, but if he can cut in on her at the Everglades dances where everybody sees him he's quite happy."

"Who is the beautiful woman with the gray hair and the triple row of pearls?"

"My dear, that is Mrs. Samuel Cunningham, familiarly known as the Empress Teresa. Of all the women in Palm Beach, she is the wisest at exclusions and the kindest in inclusions. I'll introduce you to her presently."

Alberta had said very little. She sat twirling the stem of her cut crystal champagne glass. She was thinking, listening, learning. Stray words from the stream of other conversations drifted toward her. She

did not know exactly what she had expected, but she was disappointed. She had looked forward to something more intrinsically brilliant, something that would outshine the jewels. She looked toward Dick, seated between two ponderous ladies carnivorously disposed toward handsome young men. He raised his glass to her with the hint of a despairing shrug, and as she passed him on the way out with the other women, he whispered:

"I'll be with you in a few minutes. I'm damned if I'll lose any more perfectly good moonlight."

Alberta, somewhat shyly and at a loss, entered the big glass-enclosed living-room with the other women. Mollie was detained by Mrs. Cunningham, who was asking her questions about "that exquisite girl." Alberta did not quite know whether she should wait for her or go farther into the room. The Archduchess Valerie's lorgnette solved the difficulty.

"*Charmante*," said the Duchess to a tiresome American-born Countess who was monopolizing her. "Present to me that char-r-rming girl. I have not see her before. She is *délicieuse*."

The Archduchess Valerie had a marriageable son. There were no more "partis" in Europe worth considering. Americans were heiresses and generally pretty, but this young woman had "cachet." All men were

volage but there might be fewer infidelities if wives were handsomer.

Alberta approached timidly. She thought she should curtsey to the Archduchess but was not quite sure.

"Sit down, my child," said the Archduchess. She swept aside a long, old-fashioned skirt to make a place beside her on the sofa. Alberta took it with a graceful *gaucherie* that made her look very young.

"You make me to remember my own youth," said the Archduchess. "Do you love dancing?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Alberta wondered if that were right. Granny had taught her to respect the fetish of royalty. "I . . ."

But the American Countess, nee Amelie Houcks of Kansas City, interposed. "I was going to ask," she said, "whether Your Highness had seen the Waldensteins since the war. They are my husband's cousins. Tini Waldenstein was such a beauty! At the Schlep-penkur the Kaiser was always quite wild over her. The Hohenhasens of Schloss Hesenberg are also relations of ours. I often get postcards from dear Lola. My husband's brother married a second cousin of hers, Duchess dei Borgi Valentini, a tall dark woman. I'm said to be rather like her. Dear Lucrezia, I've known her from a child. My father was in diplomacy, you know. I was practically brought up in the royal nurseries in Sweden. Do you ever see Count Sven Svenstrom?"

The granddaughter of George the Fourth had an eye cold as a Norwegian lake. She congealed it further by placing before it the thin ice of her lorgnette as she turned toward the Countess.

"My dear Countess," she said, "in these last years in Switzerland I have been far too occupied in cutting out frocks for my nieces, sewing buttons on my own linen, and tutoring my son to go into society. I have quite forgotten the names of your so distinguished relatives."

The Countess subsided behind the haughty royal back.

"I have not seen you here before," continued the Archduchess, speaking to Alberta. "It is so crowded—a mob really—of delightful people, of course." The Archduchess resumed her professional smile. "My son Adalbert will amuse himself greatly. He is *joli garçon*. Will you teach him the Charleston? Your American men, they are virile, oh very, but Adalbert—well, you shall see. My sister-in-law is *enceinte* of her seventh child (God give it shall be a boy!) so she remained at Coppet and my children with her while I accompanied my brother. But next season we shall all be at Deep Sea Turrets. Your warm sunshine—we need it, with our gout and our bronchitis. They are hereditary."

Alberta felt that the diagnosis as far as the Arch-

duchess was concerned, must be mistaken. Her high nose and narrow jaw suggested adenoids. Again she was just a little disappointed at her conversation. She had been gracious, but Alberta had fancied—well, naturally she couldn't speak in blank verse like the Queen in *Hamlet*, or in the tones of a Royal Proclamation. The Princess held out her hand. "We shall meet again." Alberta was dismissed. Turning she saw the huge figure of Carrington Spizner, the wit of Palm Beach. "Hello, Archduchess," he said, "will you come to eat a hot dog with me to-morrow at my shanty—after the bath is over?" He hummed the latter part of the phrase.

The icy mask of the Archduchess broke into rippling wrinkles of laughter. "This Carrington, he is an original! Hot dog! If it were pig or even wild ass, I would come with the greatest pleasure."

"Royalty is always so indiscriminating. Did you see how the Archduchess talked to that new girl and turned her back on the Countess?" said Mrs. Shelton, who looked like the advertisement for Michelin tires, and who was the mother of the dullest deb in Palm Beach. "And now she's paying no attention whatever to Ambassador Corliss and seems to be laughing at some vulgar joke of Carrington Spizner. Sometimes I almost see the Bolshevists' side of things."

Alberta, cast adrift by the Archduchess, looked about her for another mooring. Mollie seemed to have vanished, but before she had time to be frightened Dick was at her elbow. "Come on out into the patio," he said. "The men will be smoking for another half-hour before the show begins and we don't want to get stuck with any of these old dubs. I see you're right in the royal enclosure. What did I tell you? Beauty, beauty, my dear. That's all there is to it!"

They slipped out into the garden and the moon saw what moons have seen and will see as long as they are occupied in the lax chaperonage of lovers.

When the men had finished their cigars on the south veranda and had joined the ladies in the big central hall, the Prince looked vainly about for Alberta. The guests for the musical had begun to arrive. The footmen were busy finding seats for them around the four sides of the big patio. Crowds did not interest the Prince. He chanced to glance up at one of the many little balconies of the main house. Leaning over it, and looking down into the courtyard was the girl in the white dress. Quite a magnificent youth stood beside her; a bit heavy, perhaps, thought the Prince, but *beau garçon* nevertheless. Not that he cared much about Dick or his type.

A singer, dressed superbly in gold and silver cloth,

had taken her place by the side of the stone-rimmed pool that formed the center of the patio. Masses of thick dark foliage behind her threw her sumptuous costume into gleaming relief. A cleverly manipulated spotlight made her glitter "like a jewel from the Grüne Gewölbe," thought the Prince, one of whose ancestors was Augustus the Strong.

Across the high dome of the tropic sky floated an occasional light cloud, veiling and unveiling the perfect circle of an obligingly full moon. Even nature seemed always to be posing at Palm Beach.

Assembled in the patio was all that Palm Beach could offer of splendor and of luxury; the strands of pearls, had they been fastened together, might have roped the keys to the mainland; the diamonds were sprinkled thickly like the stars in the milky way; the women's brocades, magnificent as the draperies of Veronese and Giorgione, caught the light in their rich folds; the women themselves, if the Prince had realized it, were the pick, the fine flower of the country, selected by men with power of purchase, either money, position or superior abilities from every part of the United States. To-night, gathered together in one glittering bouquet in Polly's patio they made her soirée the very apotheosis of material magnificence.

During the burst of applause that followed the

singer's first selection, the Prince decided that he had completed his official duties for the evening. One need not go on laying social cornerstones indefinitely. He had talked to Dick over the liqueur; he would present him to *die weisse Jungfrau*. Slipping from behind the column where he had been standing, near Mrs. Moxon's chair, he made his way up to the outside circular staircase that led to the balcony.

A slightly Teutonic accent suddenly marred the beauty of his Oxford English as he said: "Pray present me to Miss Varley."

The eyes of the guests in the patio turned toward the balcony, as the Prince bent over Alberta's hand. Women who had been stealthily preening themselves in the hope that the Prince would join them after dinner felt a pang of disappointment. As an attraction, he was now essential to every party; and the wiseacres, among his potential hostesses, immediately decided to use the new girl as a bait to secure his presence. Had not they heard that she was visiting the Carlions? Mentally, they reseated their tables for the following week.

"What did I tell you?" said Cyril, sitting as usual at Mollie's feet in the shadow of a big palm tree in one corner of the patio. "The whole thing will take care of itself. The girl has class, and we should be mad to

oppose Dick. Let's stop thinking about them and attend to our own affairs. Why can't we be married right here in Florida? It will be much nicer to stage a wedding in this beautiful climate than in a bleak Long Island spring." He knew how the spectacular would appeal to Mollie.

Meanwhile the Prince leaned on the parapet near Alberta.

"Many women are pretty, a few are beautiful, but one meets only one or two in a lifetime who are romantic."

Dicky, a little vexed at his interference in their tête-à-tête, nevertheless felt a thrill of pride at Alberta's evident success. The Prince was not the only man at the party who had looked at her admiringly; and Dicky knew that men never looked at women unless it was to admire.

The faint admixture of German blood in the Prince had given him the Teutonic trait of curiosity. He discovered that Alberta was partly foreign; he was quite delighted about the matador, and dropped easily into Spanish, which he spoke as fluently as he did every other language, ignoring Dicky with patrician rudeness.

"Tell me more of yourself." He was stroking her fan gently with long tapering fingers. The gesture sug-

gested a vicarious caress. She wished that she did not have the unfortunate gift of awakening interests which she was not prepared for many reasons to satisfy.

"You are as intriguing as a gitana," the Prince said, "and you have suffered—ah, yes, that is what draws us together."

Alberta did not dare to contradict a Prince, in these surroundings! At the Gato Negro she would have been bolder. Yet she did not feel in the very least the sense of rapprochement to which the Prince alluded.

"Once," continued the Prince, his back turned to the singer in the court below. "Once I wrote my epitaph. It was in Switzerland after—well, I was unhappy, deeply unhappy, and this is what I wrote; 'Here lies Waldemar Joseph Maria Carlos Angel,' and then my titles, and beneath—'A man who regrets one thing only, *that he lived.*' Could I write that again to-night, sincerely? Yet I had loved, even then!"

The Prince's well-kept hand still moved softly up and down over the feathers. A bracelet set here and there with diamonds and rubies glinted just beneath his cuff.

"Shall we dance?" interrupted Dick. The musical programme was over. He didn't understand Spanish, but he'd be darned if he'd stand for this sort of thing!

He knew quite well what the Prince must be saying. These dirty foreigners!

The Prince cut in repeatedly. "It's like dancing with the south wind," he commented. There was a queue of men following her around the floor. She was besieged with partners, showered with invitations. The Prince and the Archduchess had breveted her beauty and made her, in an hour, the fashion.

Susan Carlion, sitting out with Lord Elfringham (pronounced Fringham), observed her with satisfaction. The bread cast so unwittingly on the waters was returning richly buttered and jammed. It was quite a lesson in the advantages of charitable democracy, and willingness to oblige a friend.

"I thought even they would see it," remarked Carlion somewhat cryptically to Alberta as she passed him getting into the motor. Mollie and Dick were going to drop her at Sunset Avenue.

"You are a *succès fou*, my dear," said Mollie. "You are absolutely *made* in Palm Beach."

"You've got to hand it to your son. He's some little picker, how about it?" Dick laughed with a pleasurable sense of possession.

Mrs. Cunningham had asked Susan to bring Alberta to the big luncheon for the Archduchess—"the Prince had requested to have Miss Varley at his table," she

said; Mrs. Gordon Smith and Mrs. Shelton had proposed bridge and tea ("You mustn't go," Mollie whispered to her; "they are dull and frumpy and live in the wrong place, on the Lake Trail"); the Smithers had suggested supper on their houseboat.

Alberta lay awake a long time, the kaleidoscopic events of the day formed and reformed against the dark. Her instantaneous success—they had all insisted that it was a success—had both surprised and reassured her. She felt that after all she could take her place in this brilliant fairy tale of life. She recalled every detail of the dinner, of the women's clothes, their intonations, the whole astonishing pageant of the evening. That unpleasant first impression, made by the tableau of Mollie and the arrested Charleston, was overlaid by all that had come after. From time to time she saw it swiftly, only to thrust it aside. Mollie had been kind, even warm; she must not criticize, not until she understood, anyway. Glittering evenings like this were of course only episodic, the foam on the wave. Later she would know the big tides in the lives of these people—deep currents of motive and direction, and she would follow.

Next day Mollie would no doubt see her intimately. She had mentioned something about a heart-to-heart talk.

CHAPTER XIV

THE sand was fairly heaped with a glittering humanity that shimmered in the blinding sun with a kind of sizzling brilliance. The crude high colors of the bathing suits, alternating with accents of deep purple shadow on a gold background, were spread out in an indiscriminate, unpremeditated design like a patchwork quilt that reached to the ocean.

The public beach had recently been restored to fashionable consideration by the Prince and the Archduchess, who, having pronounced it amusing, frequented it daily. For several seasons it had been neglected by members of the smart set in favor of highly restricted strips of land and ocean where they could erect private bars and play their own little games, alcoholic and amorous, unobserved by the multitude and unreported by the press. To-day the *Social Register* and the *Almanack de Gotha* were both adequately represented.

The news of Alberta's success at Polly Moxon's circulated from group to group.

"There she comes now." Mrs. Gordon Smith turned to her sister, Mrs. Shelton. Both ladies hastily raised jeweled lorgnettes.

Dick and Alberta had escaped from the camera men and society reporters, who surrounded Mollie and Cyril, as they stood talking to the Archduchess. They raced at full speed across the sands.

"Quite Arcadian," remarked Mrs. Shelton. The wild freedom of the running, youthful figures awakened in her some vague remembrance of Paul and Virginia. Her own daughter was disappointingly ugly, a failure in a brilliant world to which her mother stupidly and obstinately condemned her.

Alberta's dark curls, iridescent in the sunlight, blew out behind her. Her supple figure, curved at the waist, attracted the monocle of the Prince, who happened for the moment to be sitting cross-legged at the feet of Miss Evangeline Farthingale, of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. "*Quelle belle cambrure!*" he reflected.

"*Voilà ce qu'on peut appeler un morceau de roi,*" remarked the French Ambassador in passing, as he staggered through the deep sand toward another group. Really, thought the Prince, these mongrel races were marvelous. It was but the embarrassment of choice. He decided to suggest to Mollie that she rent his Villa at Cintra and invite Alberta. He suspected that she was engaged to the heavy blond young giant, but that made no difference. He could visit them there. The plan would suit both his taste and his pocketbook. He

recalled complacently *le droit du seigneur*, probably feasible under such conditions.

Alberta's arms were raised now in a lovely Gothic arch above her head as she prepared to dive into the waves. Dick was close behind her. The Prince's eyes followed them until their two heads, side by side, were mere dots beyond the pier as they swam toward the horizon. Miss Evangeline Farthingale recalled his wandering attention.

"When a girl—you see what I mean . . ."

"When a girl is like you I see what I mean," replied the Prince, ever ready with supply on demand. To atone for his momentary infidelity of attention he presently bestowed upon her a cigarette case of enamel whereon were depicted two ladies, nude to the waist, engaged in a duel with swords. It had been given him by his uncle, the Grand Duke Michael of Beltravia and had his initials incrusting on the back in diamonds.

Miss Farthingale received it with transports and pressed it to her breast with the gesture of the "Age of Innocence." The case wasn't a bit up to date, and as for the "jools," they were only chips, not in the class with what Cartier turned out, but for purposes of publicity—oh, boy!

"Where've I seen that baby before?" Izzy Einstein had meditated as Alberta tripped past him. "Was it

at the Hip. or when I was booking agent for burlesque? It couldn't have been fur de Beef Trust, none of 'em weighed under one hundred and eighty in that show! Golly, I'm getting old if I can't remember that kind." He drew his violet striped cuff over his fleshy hands so that the sapphire cuff links glistened in the sun, and tilted the new Panama with the lilac hat band at a jauntier angle, as Mrs. Irene Gorstenwangle, in a pink sports suit, dropped down somewhat heavily beside him. Irene had remained a "stylish stout" in spite of a "Turkish" at Fleishman's three times a week "regular." However, her painfully acquired Grecian nose, almost Christian in its purity of line, held his affections almost to the danger point of being named as correspondent by Morris Gorstenwangle, the Fifth Avenue fur dealer.

"I read in *Town Chatter* where that swell Mrs. Harvey is going to announce her engagement to that sheik with the black hair we seen dancing at the Grill with Eve Farthingale the other night. I bet she'll hide his latch key once they get married. That's her in the blue sport suit, pervenche, they call the shade, Madame Frances told me. Say, Izzy, her beauty doctor is a piker. I can see the stitches of her five plane lift with my naked eye."

Mollie, holding a becomingly pale parasol over her

carefully enameled face, was now descending the steps, followed by Cyril. The cameras snapped busily. Cyril preened himself, feeling that every click drove a securing nail into his position.

"They say she'll lose half her allowance if she marries Maidstone. Did Harvey finally give her anything outside that enormous alimony?" Mrs. Gordon Smith's glance seemed to dissect Mollie with ghoulisn ferocity.

"No, my dear, he told me himself he wouldn't trust her with a bad penny. Of course what Dick will inherit will be a mere bagatelle—possibly fifty thousand a year—now that Harvey's remarried." Mrs. Shelton had had her eye upon Dick for her own daughter. Her vexation at her failure to interest him affected her ability to compute. "It would be just like Mollie to hurry him into an engagement with any sort of girl to free herself from responsibility. I hear she is going around the world with that fellow Maidstone. Travel is the classic means for holding men one can't interest otherwise. I call it pitiable."

"You ought to know." Mrs. Gordon Smith had indulged in a glass or two of champagne the night before. It pricked now in her arthritic knee and made her vicious toward her sister, whose deceased husband had been notoriously fickle.

"Hello, Dicky," cried Cynthia Dare as Alberta and Dick emerged from the water, "come on up to Lulu Chamber's on Sunset Avenue for cocktails, and bring your lady friend. Hello, Miss Varley! We're all going! His Royal Highness, the Prince of Boobania, I call him, will also be present. I hear he's giving you a rush. Spiffy, I call it. The Archduchess, thank God, had a previous engagement. They say she's in love with that youngish croupier at Bradley's, the one with the iron gray hair that looks like Lionel Atwell. So long!"

The groups on the beach were breaking up. Alberta, glowing from her swim, raced Dick to the bath houses. Presently they were pedaling gaily and swiftly down the shadily arched road that stretched from the Breakers to the Poinciana. She felt the exhilaration of her success. Life stretched before her like one long holiday, yet somewhere beneath the upper layers of consciousness squirmed an uncomfortable feeling of doubt. She repressed it resolutely.

She had waited at the house until the bathing hour, hoping vainly that Mollie would telephone. Surely Dick's mother would want to talk to her, to know her, but when they had met on the beach just now Mollie had only waved gaily at her over the intercepting heads of the camera men. "Don't forget luncheon at one-

thirty, my dear. There will be a new crowd for you to meet."

The cocktail party on Sunset Avenue was extremely boisterous. "Come on in," called Cynthia from the wire netted veranda. "Your hostess has gone to the pantry to order more drinks."

Several couples were stepping out to the tune of a gramophone. Some one had turned on the radio in the living-room inside. Cynthia was dancing cheek to cheek with Reginald de Rosas, the movie star of *It's a Great Life—When You Weaken*. His supple slenderness followed the curves of her body, his foot pursued the receding point of her trim slipper. Her hands, extended free, held two glasses half drained. As she made a wide-flung gesture of welcome to Dick and Alberta one of the glasses struck the shoulder of a small pale girl in lilac and fell splintered to the floor. The liquor splashed the delicate dress with small dark stains.

"Sorry, Betty," cried Cynthia.

"You'd be quite an old dear if you didn't get so tight," retorted Betty angrily.

She bent forward to brush the drops from her frock with the tiny lavender square of her handkerchief. As she did so a small shiny object dropped among the cushions of the big divan where Alberta was sitting

with the Prince. With a swooping gesture the girl tried hurriedly to retrieve it, glancing nervously about her.

"If I were you I wouldn't say . . ." began Cynthia, who was now dancing with her arms around her partner's neck.

Alberta's voice, unusually distinct, interrupted. "I'll keep your brooch for you, till you finish dancing." She looked up at Betty with a gaze meaningly intensified. She had put her hand quickly over a small metal cylinder and was now holding it in her closed palm.

"You are a darling!" whispered Betty as Alberta stealthily returned her property on the way out. Alberta could feel her fingers trembling against her own.

"Betty Falmouth's gone the limit and then some," remarked Dick when they had climbed into the wheel chair. "Poor kid! Even down here she's a bit *déclassée*—takes jewels from men and that sort of thing, I bet that brooch, for instance . . ."

Alberta made no reply.

The luncheon at Villa Miraciel turned out to be a big one. Mollie again repeated her remark about a "heart-to-heart," but all through the week Alberta never once saw her alone.

Cyril, however, was always hovering about, giving her tips, introducing her to the right people.

She offered to pose for Carlion and sat to him in the garage studio in the fresh shiny mornings when the rest of Palm Beach was not yet astir. "You look like an opal in these gleaming cross lights," he said. "Palm Beach makes the flesh tones absolutely translucent. Only Besnard could have done it, really." He backed away from his canvas. "There's something prismatic about the light here. You can't see things whole."

"I've thought that about the life," remarked Alberta. "I get perplexed. Of course," she added hastily, "it's because I'm not accustomed to it."

"Perhaps," Carlion spoke absently, suddenly reabsorbed in his problem.

"My poor little Alberta," he said presently, "we've been lost—swallowed up by the world. Life is a purgatory. Don't let yours be a purgatory without progress! Have you ever seen a good American specialist about your voice?"

"Oh," Alberta hastened to answer, "I've turned that page. I won't look back for a second. I would not want any of it, if I could not have the whole. It's like another life now—as if I had died and been born again."

"Only these fields are not Elysian," said Carlion. In the face of her reluctance he did not tamper with her recollections again. He knew only too well the costly pain of remembering.

"Bobo darling," said Mollie one day about a fortnight after the arrival of Alberta, "I haven't been able to bring myself to tell Dick about you and me. Are you sure you love me?" She was lying at full length among the cushions of the tea-room; a red Japanese parasol, held over her head to keep off the sun that penetrated the windows and fell hotly on the floor, cast a becoming flush of rosiness over her carefully enameled face. Cyril, wise in the ways of women, repeated the threadbare vows that the insatiable feminine heart demands, having first distributed a number of kisses somewhat at random over Mollie's recumbent figure, and winding up with a rather prolonged one on her throat. This apparent intoxication did not, however, impair his reasoning power.

"You're a simple little woman, dear," he said, "you've got the whole thing in your hands, if you only work it properly."

"It's so strange," Mollie soliloquized, "Dick has such a prejudice. He asked me only yesterday what the devil you were hanging around for."

Cyril frowned. "Damn that young puppy," he muttered under his breath. "The thing for you to do," he said aloud, "is to announce our engagement at once. Let me tell you how to go about it. Tell Dick this very day and get it over with. Probably he'll fly off

the handle, but you can't help that. You'll just have to stand pat, throw up at him your magnificent reception here of a totally unknown girl."

"Oh, Bobo, I do hope she's all right." Poor Mollie's knock-kneed conscience suddenly staggered to the foreground. "The real reason why I have been nice to her was on account of you and me."

"Never mind about your motives. It's results that tell. You *have* been nice to her, just keep on hammering at that, and if he gets nasty, say that you're about to plan a formal announcement party for him next week, but that he upsets you—you don't really know—and that anyway, your friends have told you you should look more into her history. He'll cave in, if I know anything about the psychology I learned at Harvard."

"But perhaps I *ought* to look into her history more," groaned Mollie, bewildered and vacillating; and literally, had she known it, between the devil and the deep sea. Cyril swore under his breath. Hell! these women were difficult. Mollie went too far, whichever way you started her. He felt as if he were walking a tight rope—a wrong step . . .

"You're getting absolutely morbid. Haven't the Carlions told you all about her? It's just the self-torturing of a wonderful conscientious nature and I adore you for it, but I must keep you from possibly

disastrous results. Alberta is a perfectly charming girl—more than presentable. You saw what the Prince thought of her. Her father was an eccentric Spanish grandee; of course on her mother's side she was connected with the stage, but you know how they respect the drama over there. I believe he was knighted—Sir George Crabtree. There's nothing whatever the matter with Alberta; it's just that I want to make things easy for you that I'm advising you to hold the club over Dick—ever so gently, of course. And speaking of angels . . . ”

Dick, a big polo coat thrown carelessly over his bathing suit, was crossing the patio for his morning's dip.

“Dicky,” called his mother tremulously. Cyril, with an encouraging pressure of her hand, disappeared into the house.

“Hello, Moll!” Dick came over and dropped down beside her.

She felt rather like a sheepish little girl instead of his mother. Her breath fluttered. “I've been wanting to tell you, Dicky, I'm going to marry Cyril.”

Dick sprang to his feet. “Oh, mother!” he cried. “How can you? Why, he's a bounder—fifteen years younger than you, at the very least. I've always hated him.”

He had flicked Mollie on the raw. She burst into petulant tears. "You're a horrid cruel boy. It's not fifteen years. You can't really call me old, anyway. I'm taken for your sister everywhere. I was married when I was only fifteen." Mollie lopped off a year every time she used the phrase.

"Shut up, mother," said Dick. "Why don't you make it twelve, and have done with it?"

Mollie was crying audibly. "How can you insult your poor mother, and after the way I've recognized Alberta, too."

"You haven't recognized her," cried Dick, "any more than the whole place has recognized her—gone down before her—as I knew it would."

Mollie was sobbing piteously, her bobbed head hidden among the cushions. She looked small, pale, pathetic.

"And where shall I be when you marry?" she wailed, forgetting the lesson Cyril had taught her and speaking now from the sloppy but warm shallows of her heart. "Love is all that counts, anyway. You know how your father treated me. I've always given you everything, and now with your own happiness in sight you come and try to spoil mine."

Something in Dick gave way as he looked at her. The hackneyed phrase of "butterfly on the wheel"

came to his mind. She had had a rotten deal, no one could gainsay that; and she was a harmless sort of a creature, quite without malice, and loving in her way. He recalled various demonstrations of an affectionate though capricious motherliness. Perhaps she might as well buy herself a new doll, even if it got broken. He patted her on the back.

"And, Dicky," went on Mollie, taking up the thread of Cyril's lesson again as she felt Dick weaken, "I was just going to propose announcing our two engagements together, or something—but now I'm so upset, I don't know . . ."

The suggestion was insidious. Dick wanted matters settled. The period of probation, with only the secret understanding between him and Alberta, her engagement ring hanging beneath her dress on a thin chain instead of being worn openly on her finger, had its dangers. Other men hovered around her. Suppose some one should make her change her mind—he had never felt that her acceptance had the ardor of a great passion.

"Forgive me, Mollie," he said. "Funny we should be so hard hit at the same time." He stroked her hand. "You have been pretty white to Alberta, old dear. I dare say your Cyril isn't so bad. I've never heard anything really against him, even from Harvard men. It's

in his favor that he likes you. I guess it's up to me to give him my blessing—how about it, mother? A double wedding would knock them cold even at Palm Beach, eh, what?"

She flung herself into his arms, put up her unbecomingly tear-stained face to be kissed. Then hurriedly she opened her vanity case, lengthened an eyebrow, corrected a smeared line along a lower lid, whitened her nose, and drew upon her pale face the silly arabesque of a pierrot's mouth. Her mask of feinted youth thus reconstituted, she left him and went to find Cyril.

CHAPTER XV

AFTER the announcement of the two engagements, Dick and Alberta sometimes pleaded the lovers' alibi. They did not go to every party, although of course Mollie insisted on their accepting all really important invitations. Alberta had more leisure to observe the maelstrom from the shore, however. The prospective marriage of Mollie and Cyril secretly repelled her. She tried to defend them against her own imputations by recalling other affairs and marriages between older women and young men—George Eliot and Lewis; the Baroness Burdett Coutts and her secretary. Granny had often told her about them. But these people had had the bond of an extraordinary intellectuality, they were developed on a high plane of mentality, calculated to provide at least some lasting satisfaction.

This affair of Mollie's was quite unmental. Cyril's manner was possessive to a degree, and Mollie's demonstrations in public made Alberta turn away her eyes, and Dick squirm uncomfortably. Everybody in Palm Beach laughed a little at first, but a nine days' wonder is reduced to half that length in the land of perpetual

pleasure. Besides, Cyril was a perfect dancer, and as a matter of fact, a hidden penchant for him was the secret inhibition of many a matron as old as Mollie. Men didn't like him—they do not generally admire beauty in their own sex, but the women ran true to form.

"Let's have a starlight picnic all by ourselves out at the Inlet, instead of going to the Cunninghams', Dick," suggested Alberta. It was hot, the party of the night before had lasted till morning. Having begun fairly decorously at the Moxons, it had flitted riotously through one of the "Grills," and paused soddenly at Bradley's in transit to Cynthia Dare's, where, after many highballs, it had extinguished its giggling hilarity in the sobering waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Alberta felt guilty at the amount of expensive liquor she had poured into the shrubbery of the patio and wondered what effect champagne had on horticulture. The whole thing troubled her.

"When we are finally married and go north, Dick," she said, as they lay stretched on the sand in the cool of the short twilight. "we won't be living like this, will we? I don't mean to be a prig, but we all eat and drink and play too much down here. It isn't life at all. It isn't cozy!"

"How about it now?" He drew her sweet white face down upon his shoulder.

She did not resist him but she went on seriously. "It's something made up and artificial. They haven't any troubles, never have had any. They have paid no toll. Why, no one is even poor! Of course I didn't expect to distribute unbleached cotton undergarments to Polly Moxon or present flannel B. V. D.'s to Mr. Cunningham! But still——"

"The Prince is the only pauper among us, I guess," laughed Dick. "Perhaps you'd prefer to marry the superintendent of the Soldiers' Home, or the Blind Asylum?" He kissed her stormily. "I haven't thought about anything seriously," he said, "beyond our wedding. Let's eat our lotuses while we may." His mouth pressed her lips.

"But what are you finally going to *do*?" insisted Alberta when he had released her.

"Do?" Dick stretched himself and rolled over so that his head lay in her lap. "Just get Mollie to double my allowance, then get father to double *that*. Afterward—well, I guess we'll knock about and spend it a while."

"But, Dick, don't you want to be something in your country—in politics, for instance?"

"I suppose you wish I'd help to make the Volstead Act permanent, judging from what I vaguely seem to remember of what you said last night on the way back from Cynthia's."

"I think if the men of our generation could spend more time in helping make good laws, and less in breaking the foolish ones, it would be better for everybody concerned," retorted Alberta heatedly. "Perhaps it's because I was so disappointed about a career that I feel everybody must want one. And, Dicky dear, as we shan't have a career as parents either, we'll have to work doubly hard to build up something for ourselves that will count."

Dicky disregarded the question of offspring. They would be a lot freer to do as they pleased than if they were tied to a nursery, and Alberta wouldn't lose her figure. He'd told her so half a dozen times already.

"My dear girl, why should I muddle in among a lot of windy-mouthed, long-haired westerners and grafting Irishmen?" he answered. "It's time America had a leisure class, and you betcher life you and I are going to show 'em how! Alberta darling, you shall have everything—everything from a box at the opera where we can park our elderly guests, to a house at Market Harborough where I can ride off the drinks you object to with the hunting set."

"But, Dick, I don't want only to *get*, I want us to *be*."

Suddenly there seemed to write itself among the stars which had come out above them a phrase from a

letter written to her before the announcement of her engagement. The words were commonplace enough and yet they shone in her memory:

"Saw Doctor Evans St. Clair yesterday about the new addition to the Laboratory I want to build for the Medical School I told you about. The Committee accepts the proposition and I may have to add more money than I figured at first. However, I'm not a marrying man and I guess I can afford it."

Alberta shivered. "It's really too chilly out here—let's go back."

Alberta's visit to the Carlions was drawing to a close. She was to move up to Villa Miraciel, where Mollie's daughter Phyllis was expected. Phyllis had been abroad with her grandmother. Alberta had scarcely heard her mentioned, a fact attributed to the loose shifting of family ties in this particular set. She had enjoyed her stay at the Carlions'; it had given her the opportunity of renewing her affectionate intercourse with Carlion.

Susan was officiously busy installing her new house. She never neglected Carlion, of course. The villa on Sunset Avenue was just as perfectly managed as if she had not the big palace on her mind. It was furnished

in chintzes, white, with a pale blue stripe; and the painted gray furniture and turquoise carpet made it delightfully pretty and fresh when one came in from the heat. There was not, however, one deep comfortable chair, one cozily shabby corner, where a man could stretch himself, mentally or physically. But then, Carlion was quite content pottering around his garage studio, and Susan's appointments with, decorators, architects and landscape gardeners curtailed her present hospitality, and left him additional freedom.

One evening after dinner he and Susan's cousin, Tom Andrews, who was stopping at the Everglades, were smoking their cigars in the big room with its three deep chairs, its attractive litter of brushes, tobacco jars, cigarettes and tall glasses. Carlion rapped the ashes from his pipe on to the floor as he listened to Tom.

"The trouble with the structure of society nowadays is that the gods, and above all, the goddesses, have left their shrines," said Andrews who had stood outside the drama, or the comedy, since he had come to Palm Beach, commenting on it after the manner of the Greek chorus, impersonal and dispassionate. Carlion had dubbed him the Observer, and himself the Passenger.

"When they want to climb back, they'll find their

places taken," went on Andrews. "Take, for example, ladies—I know the term is obsolete—in this arbitrary grouping we call society, women for instance, like Mollie, dancing the Charleston, vamping their Cyrils. And then they complain when the kind of sirens who used to be satisfied to be clandestine concubines insist on marrying half-discarded husbands, or neglected sons. They frequent cabarets and night clubs, rub shoulders with the riff-raff of great cities; discount the sinister, casual associations of dissipated spas, and are surprised when the sewage of the street, in which they have dipped the tips of their gilded slippers, breaks through the crust of society into their own houses. The integrity of the upper classes can only be retained by their *remaining* upper; olympian; but the women have deliberately jumped from their pedestals into the teeth of danger; the hideous democracy of common dissipation has tarred them all with the same brush; and false gods step easily into forsaken shrines, or leave them empty. It's all one. I swear, the only decent girl I see in Palm Beach is that little ex-model of yours." Andrews snorted. He had the reputation of being crusty.

"*Qui va à la chasse perd sa place,*" said Carlion. "It's the same in art; men of distinction who should be ashamed of a bawling publicity come down and mingle

with the bourgeois! The Philistine, the charlatan, the poseur, take their places."

"Thus spake Zarathustra," laughed Dicky in the doorway. "What are you and Tom so damned sick about? Alberta and I are bound for Cynthia Dare's. She telephoned to us at Polly's. It's always a riot at her house, and lots of booze." Alberta's dark eyes looked at Dicky with sudden anxiety. He drank far too much, though he carried his liquor fairly well. The more formal gatherings of the season were letting up; there was a general *laissez-allez*. "The best is yet to come," Dick had said to her.

What she saw bewildered her increasingly. She was glad Phyllis was coming; a girl of her own age, with whom she could talk things over, extract explanations. She did not like Cynthia Dare, and she was quite silent as Dick's runabout snorted up the ocean drive toward the rather remote Italian villa. Sound of great hilarity proceeded from within as they drew up at the gate. "They seem to be hitting it up early in the game," commented Dick.

The maid in the dressing-room handed Alberta a Japanese hand-embroidered kimono. "Madame said for you to slip this on over your dress." It was evidently a costume party. They entered the big upper hall, half loggia, half living-room. At first she did

not understand; she could not believe the sinister meaning of the scene before her. In the middle of the room stood Cynthia. For a moment she did not recognize her, made up as a fat woman with a dyed wig, and a huge bust on which was pinned an indiscriminate mass of jewelry. Around her stood grouped a number of the girls they all knew, dressed in kimonos. Jack Bumstead, made up like an old roué with a red nose and a monocle, was doing a Charleston. Another young man, his eyes darkened, his clothes shabby, evidently represented a dope fiend.

They were all laughing, in a foolish embarrassed sort of way, Alberta thought.

"It's a scream! Whoever but Cynthia would have thought of it!" cried Betty. Her green kimono revealed a clinging peach colored slip beneath; she looked almost naked. Most of the company seemed already to have been drinking far too much. The negro orchestra in the loggia was playing *All Alone*.

"Come on, Dick, and be presented to the Madam," roared Johnny Shinner, evidently quite tipsy. "She'll pick you a girl."

"Oh, Dick," whispered Alberta, "I don't want . . ."

"Don't be a prig," said Dick.

Vi Hemingway had caught him into a wild dance. The whole group stampeded him. But Alberta had

flown; she fairly threw her kimono at the attendant in the dressing-room, and ran down the drive.

"They don't know what they're doing," she thought, her mind unconsciously paraphrased the greatest words of human understanding ever spoken. "They can't; they don't understand; they haven't lived. It's the indecency of innocence, it must be," she thought.

She had sat down by the roadside in the sand, and was looking up at the sky. Was this really the place in life toward which she had aspired? Goodness and fineness, and above all that something which she called *real*, seemed always to be retreating before her advance, maddeningly, like a will-o'-the-wisp. She took from her bosom two letters, they hung inside her dress in a sachet suspended by the chain that had held her ring. She had received them to-day. As she held them in her hand the moon was almost bright enough to read by, but she already knew them by heart. The one on the big sheet was headed Johns Hopkins. It did not begin "Dear Alberta"; it just started straight off. "Of course you could not fail, you just *are*. Everybody must see that. I want you and Dick to be endlessly happy. The same, now and a thousand years from now, Jim"—that was all. Jim did not stutter on paper.

The second letter, all crumpled and smeared, repre-

sented Sandro's first attempt at polite correspondence in English.

"*Carissima* Miss: Signor Jim tell me you get marry. I am most *contentissimo* that you are take spouse. I writa you *Inglase* all alone. I no letta Signor help. I wanta make see to you how I learn much with the Signor Jim. I lika him. He *molto simpatico*. When he got telegram from you and Signor Dick he laid it on table long time before he opened, then he have say nothing for long while; I think Signor Jim love you. I think he wounded in heart. I am much much sorry for Signor Jim. He sit all night over his study, but he do no work. *Molto male!* But he verra kind to me, Sandro. And now he talk again another time, and always of you. *Tanti baci* from

"SANDRO

"P. S. Will Signor Jim and me be invite see you matrimony in the Palazzo in Palm Beach?"

The tears in Alberta's eyes blotted out the stars. Presently she got up and began walking toward Sunset Avenue. The warm breeze blew her chiffon cloak out behind her. Her high-arched feet bore her less lightly than usual along the road. It was a long way, and it would take more than an hour to get back. Whenever she saw the headlights of a car coming, she

stepped aside into the palm bushes or hid in the angle of a wall. Dick would be coming back to find her, and she did not want to speak with him just now. She found Carlion still smoking in his studio. Andrews had gone home.

"Was it an amusing party?" he queried.

She sat down on the arm of a chair opposite him.

"I can't always understand," she answered. Her eyes were on the floor. Carlion thought the lids were as lovely as magnolia leaves.

He rose and bending over her gently, kissed her hair. "Alberta," he said seriously, "are you very sure it's worth it? Remember there are only three things—love, work and friendship. All the rest is . . ." He did not finish, for just then Dick stood in the doorway, and Carlion glanced at him and went out.

Dick looked angry and flushed, in spite of his drive through the cool night. "Why did you leave like that? I looked for you everywhere. *I* don't choose that you should insult my friend!"

"I didn't think they would miss me," faltered Alberta. "And it was all so horrid."

"Horrid, was it? Well, I should have supposed, after all you've told me, that a girl of your experience would not exactly be a Miss Priss of Injured Innocence!"

Alberta got up. "We won't argue it now," she said. "You'll be sorry afterward." She smelled the liquor-laden odor of his hot breath as she tried to pass, but he barred the way.

"You angel-devil, you!" he cried, trying to clasp her. But she slipped under his outstretched arms, and sought refuge in the house.

CHAPTER XVI

MOLLIE'S mother had married *en secondes nocces* le Marquis de Hautcoeur, now deceased. Her granddaughter Phyllis had spent the mid-winter with her in Saint Moritz and the Marquise had profited by her granddaughter's return (she always called her "the child") to revisit, as she did every other season, the land of her birth. Being of a fiercely independent nature she declined her daughter's offers of hospitality, and engaged a suite for herself and maid at the Poinciana. Phyllis, of course, was to lodge at Villa Miraciel. Alberta had looked forward to Phyllis's arrival with longing. She felt that Phyllis would be the bearer of the clue, that she would be able to answer for her the strange social enigma that so puzzled and bewildered her. These people were gentle mannered, their intonations bespoke cultivation and refinement; they were kind, too, in general; at least they had shown themselves so to her; nor did they seem deeply vicious, but they played with virtue and with vice, tossing them about lightly like jugglers with balls or Indian clubs, one never knew what would fall to the ground. She felt all the time that they were amateurs at wickedness;

she herself was years older than Cynthia—than Mollie, even. *She knew*. She had lived. They were only playing at life. Why did they want to *act* instead of *being*? Phyllis would explain to her.

The morning after Cynthia's party Alberta moved up to Villa Miraciel. Apparently Dick was sleeping off the effects of the night before, for she did not see him in the courtyard, nor in the big room beyond. She was glad, for she dreaded meeting him in her present mood. A maid installed her in a charming room adjoining the one destined for Phyllis. There was a balcony in common and a connecting door would also make for intimacy. Alberta's room was rather stagily Spanish. It had an uneven floor of tile, unpleasant to walk on, but beautiful in color. There was a shrine with a madonna in it on one wall, and a *prie dieu* beneath it, on which lay, somewhat surprisingly, a copy of the Decameron. True, the binding looked rather like a prayer-book.

When the maid was gone, Alberta dropped to her knees upon the *prie dieu*. In her perplexity she tried to project herself toward a god who must be in his heaven, if all were ever to be "right with the world," an assertion which she doubted.

A bustling commotion in the next room awakened her from her reveries, or her orisons, or whatever her

muddled attempt at devotion might have been called. She sprang up in time to see an apparition, fresh and blonde, white and gold, standing in the long window that gave on to the balcony.

"May I come in?" Phyllis seemed to enter the room on a sunbeam. "My inhospitable family are not exactly eager to welcome me. They are still asleep. I hear you're Dick's latest. Only this time (as always) it's the real thing, and no wonder—you're pretty beyond words. Has he been hitting it up lately? Or have you tamed him? I like your hair almost better than a bob. I'm thinking of letting mine grow again." She rattled on gaily without leaving Alberta time to reply. "Have a cigarette?" she reached out her case, and threw herself at full length on the *chaise-longue*. "I hear you were on the stage. I adore the theater—I should love to get into the cast of the *Follies*. I've acted in the Junior League. You must tell me all about life."

"I want you to tell *me*," said Alberta. "I know it's my fault—everybody's been so nice to me—but I don't understand. You're my age—you *can* tell me."

"I suppose you think we are all rotten, the way the movies make us out to be." Phyllis curled her slender silken legs under her. "Hortense is running my bath, but I'm simply thrilled at seeing you, and I've just got

to talk. What do you want to know? You're not going to ask me to explain Mollie, I hope?"

Alberta felt as if she flushed. She hoped Phyllis did not see her. After all, her own mother! She must get some sort of solution to her problem immediately, however, before she saw Dick again. This was a "nice" girl, who had been to fine schools and who had lived sheltered from any forced ignoble contacts. If she could not explain, no one could. She would be unprejudiced, fair, on the inside. Perhaps she, Alberta, was an outsider, was over-critical. She drew a light wicker chair near to the *chaise-longue*.

"I'd like to ask you about something that happened last night." She clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. Hesitating, her head half turned away from Phyllis, she began a description of the party. The girl on the sofa gave a wild whoop.

"Isn't Cynthia a scream!" she cried. "She's always a jump ahead of the devil himself. Just my luck to miss it. Tell me again—how did you say she dressed the part?"

"The bath of Mademoiselle grows cold," squealed a French voice through the door.

"I'm simply filthy," said Phyllis. "The East Coast Railway is the limit. I'll leave the door open so we can go on talking. Have there been many more parties

like that? Saint Moritz was too dull for words. Give me my own, my native land, every time." She was gone through the doorway. There was no use. Alberta saw it now—felt that she had flung herself once more against a closed gate. She would never know. She was lost, a stranger in a strange land. Where did she belong, she wondered. Not here—nor yet in the shifting vulgarity of cheap vaudeville, nor the sordid dangers of Gambrinus and El Gato Negro. Where? Where? As she screwed the long earrings absent-mindedly on her ears, she realized that she must solve her perplexities alone.

The table was very gay. Phyllis had taken her mother's engagement to Cyril in good part. Live and let live was her motto. If you didn't interfere with people, they didn't interfere with you. Marriage implied nothing permanent. Why shouldn't Mollie enjoy herself for a few years? Cyril would provide agreeably for her last decade and have time to get something out of life himself afterward. She rather liked Cyril. One shouldn't deny wholesome amusement to the former generation.

"If Cyril doesn't object, why should we?" she had remarked to her brother over the cocktails.

Dick had managed to have a word with Alberta in

the patio. "Forgive me, Alberta," he said. "Perhaps I had had a drink or two too many."

"It isn't a case of forgiving," Alberta replied. "But I'm beginning to be afraid I never shall fit!—The whole party——"

"You're getting morbid! I'll tell the world the party was going some—but it happened on an impulse. Everybody had had a few rounds of cocktails, and the whole thing just swung a bit too far. I told them you had a headache when they discovered you were gone. I was afraid your leaving like that would get you in wrong. They've all liked you and been awfully decent. Nothing happened, anyway. It was perfectly decorous. In fact, it went quite flat, the way costume parties generally do. Whenever the jazz stopped for a second we sort of stood around looking at one another. So finally they went for a moonlight swim, except me. I came back to look you up. You know they've all been pretty damned decent to you."

The phrase grated on Alberta, yet it touched her, too. Goodness knew they had had enough to overlook before taking her in, and they had done it with their eyes open. Was she unreasonably hard? And about a childish prank? Who hadn't gone too far occasionally, in some ways? She hated to be ungrateful.

"For heaven's sake, Alberta, don't begin analyzing. It's high time we got married. Let's hurry Mollie up and get set for week after next. Cyril will back us."

"You must take Alberta to call on Granny immediately after lunch, Dicky," called Mollie from the head of the lunch table. "You will find her in the southeast corner of the Poinciana veranda where she has sat at the same hour every day whenever she has been in Palm Beach, for the last twenty years. Nothing we can do will change her routine. That comes of marrying a Frenchman. You and I are going to be wildly irregular, Cyril darling, and never do anything twice the same." She leaned across and tapped his hand lightly.

The Marquise de Hautcoeur was something of an anomaly at Palm Beach. Perhaps with her perfect sense of the appropriate, she knew this. At all events one never saw her at Bradley's, nor on the crowded beach, as one often did other women of her age—who in the effort to be modern squeezed their *avoirdufois* into the strange bulbous forms of rococo architecture, and faced the tropical sun and the impertinent cameras of society photographers with a misplaced confidence. The Marquise de Hautcoeur, on the contrary, shunned publicity. Whenever she came out of her corner suite it was to sit quietly with her tambour of embroidery in

a sheltered corner on the land side of the veranda. "My *avant-scène*," she called it. From thence she observed. The few cronies of bygone days, who came to bake their rheumatism in the Florida sunshine, always visited her, and there was something in the wise old smile of the Marquise de Hautcoeur that drew youth also. Even Cynthia Dare, ruthless where her own generation was not concerned, seldom failed to pause and greet her, and Peterkin Barton, a small boy of five, saved his pennies to buy her chocolates, which the Marquise accepted with perfectly simulated ecstasy.

To-day, she was an object de luxe to be appreciated by the connoisseur, for she was dressed with that perfect elegance only attainable in one of her years by a combination of personal taste, a remembrance of past fashion, a hint of the mode of the moment and the services of a great dressmaker. Her hat was reminiscent of Winterhalter, her soft laces and heavy silks accented here and there by a fine jewel. The old heart beneath the delicate ruffles was beating rather more violently than was good for it. She had heard of Dick's engagement and was worried. As for Mollie and Cyril, Mollie had always been hopeless. But young lives—that was different!

Her foot, daintily shod in the flat slipper, tapped the floor of the piazza impatiently. She was waiting

for Carlion with whom she had always had a deep friendship. And she had known and loved Olga Sacanovitch. She had summoned Carlion, knowing he would tell her, give her a real opinion about this unknown feminine quantity that had captured the buoyantly vagrant fancy of her handsome grandson.

"Good morning, Charlotte!" Her reflections were interrupted by Governor Van Peldt. The Governor was nearly eighty. He had been an attaché of her father's embassy years ago, and in those days the gay Charlotte had flouted him.

"Aren't you a little pale this morning?" he questioned solicitously.

"An emotion," said the Marquise. "Sit down, Mark."

He lowered himself warily into the piazza chair, avoiding a twinge in his gouty knee.

"It is about Dicky! This girl to whom he is engaged? I hear she is of the theater." The Marquise spoke out her preoccupation. "At my age it is difficult to stretch my understanding to take in this new world of changed manners and shifting principles. Modern society has strange contacts. Often they displease me. Yet one thing I know in my heart of hearts just as well, Mark, as when you and I missed each other at the crossroads, the only happiness is to be with those we love. And I want Dicky to have it."

"Why did you not see that forty years ago?" He sought her wrinkled hand amid its laces. "I still adore you," said old Mark Van Peldt.

"Hush," she said. "Those were the years of compromise. In the beginning one sees clearly; one is unprejudiced, brave, looking life straight in the eye; later the vision is blurred; one compromises; the middle years are despicable. At the end, one is alone again with one's gods and they are the gods of one's youth. But," she made a gesture of dismissal, "the snows of yester-year, let them lie! It is new lives that matter. Tell me——"

But old Mark knew very little about Alberta, except that he had seen her—young and lovely, and constantly surrounded.

"She is quite the rage, even in this astounding community," he said. "*À tout à l'heure*—for here comes Carlion. We will have our chat another time." He hoisted himself from his chair and tactfully hobbled away.

"Do you think me a tiresome, meddlesome old woman, Carlion dear?" she reached up her hand for him to kiss. "I fear always that my age will become the ugly caricature of my youth."

"With women like you, Marquise, age can emphasize, but it can not caricature."

"Thank you, Carlion, for your graceful consolations. But I am eager. Tell me about this fiancée of my grandson, this Mademoiselle de Nulpart come from no one knows where. Mollie would let him marry a murderess rather than be disturbed in any of her own little amorous intrigues."

"Alberta is unusual, an exception," began Carlion slowly, "one of those beings that happen one does not know exactly why. Poverty did not restrict her, luxury will not spoil her."

"She is presentable then?" said the Marquise. "*Tant mieux*, so far so good."

"She is more than presentable," answered Carlion. "Hers is a fine surface that has surprisingly taken polish."

"Ah, it needed polish then. What are her antecedents?"

What Carlion told her was without embellishment. It was however an understanding interpretation of Alberta tinged with his liking for her. "A wise woman like yourself knows," he wound up, "that nature has these surprises. How often she revenges herself on the self-styled aristocracy by putting forth some astounding vulgarian, and then to even things up, she makes a lily spring from a dunghill. Incidentally Alberta is developing every day. She reads. She is

observing. When she has observed long enough she may prove too much for your grandson."

"Then according to you, the superficial side is adequate and the essential solid?" mused the Marquise.

"Exactly. She could become a personage and help Dick to overcome his sophomorish attitude toward life."

"All America is sophomorish," said the Marquise. "I find Phyllis singularly crude. She and the rest of them, seem to think so many old worn-out perversities new and therefore alluring. I try to reason with her about these messes of pottage, but youth has no ears! I want to like this Alberta. I want to be convinced. The years hurry one away from love so fast. There is so much to say and so little time to say it. In my day we put too many hollands on our emotions. We covered them as we did the furniture lest they should fade. We should have used them, even if we used them up and put the hollands on afterward; for they only faded beneath their covers after all, and without the sun! And Carlion dear, apropos of nothing, *de bottes* as we say, on the Day of the Dead each year, I lay a crown of Parma violets on Olga's grave at Passy. There were no hollands in the rue du Val de Grâce."

She laid her hand upon his knee, and he covered it

for a moment with his own, looking away, out into the shimmer and the shade of the big garden.

"To use and use up!" he repeated the Marquise's phrase. "Have I told you enough?" He rose suddenly.

"About this matter, yes. The next time we will talk of you, my dear, dear friend."

A joyous "Hello, Granny" interrupted Carlion's answer. Dick, coming up from behind, was stooping to kiss the Marquise. "This is Alberta Varley," he said, drawing Alberta after him.

Carlion had vanished.

Alberta stood quite simply in her plain white dress looking down at the Marquise, recognizing her already as a great lady, an ideal. And the Marquise looked back. Her eyes, wise, piercing, kind, gazed straight into Alberta's face.

"My dear," said the Marquise de Hautcoeur, "my dear." She drew her into the chair beside her.

"You are in luck, my good-for-nothing," the Marquise smiled up at her grandson. "Now leave us together. We will talk. A man is in the way between two women—even a charming young man like you. We must make acquaintance. Fetch her in half an hour."

When Dick had retreated down the long vista of the colonnaded piazza, the Marquise turned the direct

gaze of her bright blue eyes, keen from observation, kind from experience, toward Alberta. "And what do you want of life and Dicky?" she asked disconcertingly.

Alberta paused only a moment. "Opportunity," she answered. Her words astonished her. She had been startled into clarifying her own motive.

"Opportunity!" repeated the Marquise, "and what for?" She had a way, when she cared to use it, of drawing from people the very essence of themselves. They seldom resented it. Her age gave her privileges, and a latent power in her contributed to her authority. This time Alberta hesitated longer, not with any idea of evasion, but in order to express the truth accurately.

"First I want to understand," she said at last.

The blue eyes of the Marquise gave out a spark. She leaned forward interested. Carlion was right. This girl was out of the ordinary.

"And what do you want to understand?"

"All of this!" Alberta made a circular gesture. "I get perplexed. I love the beauty, the hospitality, the kindness of everybody, the nice voices, the manners of people like the Carlions, Mr. Andrews, Mrs. Cunningham too, but often I can't get down into reality. There is so little time. No one has a home, only a hotel or a restaurant—I mean they fill their homes with

crowds. I do so long for a home. I suppose they've had what I want and tired of it. But," she hesitated again, "I've had what they often imitate just for fun, ugly things (I'll tell you sometime), and I hated it."

The Marquise nodded.

"The circus set, my dear, is the *enfant terrible* of American society. And when you understand, what do you want to become?"

"A lady like you," answered Alberta. "You see I wasn't born one," she added sincerely. "Granny always tried—but—well! It's even more important to die one than to be born one, isn't it?"

The Marquise smiled. "And when you have become a lady, I quote your own phrase and take you for the moment at your own valuation, what then?"

"I don't know yet. But I shall find out. I am learning. I read. I look. When I *know*, when I have *become*, I can begin to do. Already there is Dick to be helped. He's only idle. He must have a career. His father will give him a chance. We must get back to a big town where people must compete, where they must use their tools; I don't only want to get, I want to be," and Alberta flushed. "There is so much we must do outside ourselves. I know the difficulties. Dick does not. Think of all the talents that go to the wall just for lack of a little shove. I have seen it,

felt it. We must get back into life good, bad, hard and easy. And of course Sandro must be educated!"

"And who is Sandro?"

Alberta explained. "Jim Dunscombe is looking after him now," she ended.

"I hear Jim is by way of becoming a Pasteur or a Ledoyen," commented the Marquise. "Years ago in Paris I told Susan Dunscombe that the boy was unusual. I remember I quoted Lamartine, 'The finger of destiny marks the soul not the forehead.' Unfortunately, Susan is superficial. I suppose James also is in love with you. It is of your ages! My dear, I like your views. I am at the end of a long road. You are at the beginning, but the altitude is the same. Will you forgive an old woman her questions? One must have knowledge before one can give friendship."

She stretched out her hand with an air of bestowing. The Marquise was still a power, and she knew it. Her approbation of Dick's marriage would be of more value in the North than all of Palm Beach's facile admiration put together. Many a social position, grown in Florida sunshine, got nipped in the New York frost. She could establish for this serious girl real relations.

"Come to me with your perplexities, my dear," said the Marquise when Dick had come to fetch Alberta.

"See that you deserve her," she said to Dick.

Again Alberta's heart swelled with gratitude.

Phyllis's arrival at Villa Miraciel at once attracted a new visitor. Betty Falmouth, who lived by her wits and followed up casual invitations from house to house, appeared with a dress-suit case that contained a vast collection of formless bits of chiffon which turned into dresses when she thrust her pale little head and thin arms through sundry holes and slits in their cloudy fluffiness. They were trade-marked Bendel, Frances, Peggy Hoyt, and must have cost a good deal, even at sales, Alberta reflected. Betty lacked all the accessories, however, and was constantly borrowing slippers, tulle, underwear, and even lip sticks, from Phyllis. Evidently her allowance from a divorced father, re-married in California, was exhausted by the initial expenditure on frocks.

She had been a room-mate of Phyllis at Miss Moran's. Alberta could hear them whispering in the next room till the wee hours of the morning. The intimacy worried her. Phyllis was a harmless and easy-going girl, but Betty . . . Her lilac pallor and the queer white look about her eyes reminded Alberta much too forcibly of Darcy. It must be a settled habit, she reflected. Neither she nor Betty had ever alluded to the episode at their first meeting, and Betty avoided Alberta as one does measles or one's own conscience.

Alberta had been dancing all the evening at a small and selected party that Mrs. Cunningham had given for the Prince. The list, carefully edited by a social secretary celebrated for tactful omissions for which she invariably assumed the blame on the score of inefficiency, had not comprised Betty Falmouth. Indeed, Miss Dart's exclusions on this occasion had quite ruled out the entire circus set, and her rigorous censorship deleted the party to a dullness that sent Mrs. Cunningham's guests home early. Alberta, to whom the hurried, shattered hours of Palm Beach were fatiguing, asked Dick to drop her at Villa Miraciel when he proposed going on to Bradley's.

"I will go in to your mother for half an hour," she said. A recurrent temperature, due to an attack of the influenza, that lurks in the deceptive, draughty heat of the Florida spring, had kept Mollie at home. Alberta stopped at her door and tapped gently. There was no reply. Evidently Mollie was asleep. Alberta was disappointed. She had learned to expect nothing consecutive from the kangaroo-like mind that sprang from topic to topic without thought of sequence, but she found in her future mother-in-law a sort of misplaced and belated childishness that made her weakness endearing. She hoped that Cyril would not play upon it too devastatingly.

It was hot and stuffy in her room and she decided to pull the *chaise-longue* out on to the balcony and lie for a while in the flood of moonlight. The quiet radiance would soothe her. There had been too many facets to the glittering day. Presently she floated suavely on the surface of a long wavering dream.

She was awakened by two voices, interrupted by a curious shuddering sobbing. The sound came from the court below and as she listened, startled and cold, it stopped suddenly as if it had been muffled. Alberta leaned over the balcony. It was almost dawn and she clearly distinguished the figures of Cyril and Betty. Cyril's hand, held over the girl's mouth, still blurred her rising hysteria. His other arm was around her waist. Turning, Alberta entered her room and ran quickly down the stairs. She was close upon them before they knew it.

"I'll take care of her," she said. She asked no questions. Betty had ceased crying, though disjointed words chattered from between her lips, shaken out by the trembling of her body.

"Cyril, you must—whatever will I do—you couldn't refuse me—not after . . ."

"For God's sake, Alberta, don't listen to her, she's crazy. Why, damn her, there are half a dozen men . . ."

But Alberta was not listening. She was bringing all her quiet force to bear upon getting Betty into the house and to bed before she should awaken the household. She could find out afterward what this scene was about. She thanked God that Phyllis had flown over to Havana with the Dares.

Finally Betty lay whimpering and trembling between the covers.

"Now tell me what's the matter?" said Alberta.

"It's money. I've got to have money," Betty beat her clenched fists against the pillows.

Alberta felt a sudden relief. The two figures in the court below had filled her with a sickening fear.

"The beast! He wouldn't give it to me," went on Betty, biting her twitching lips.

"What do you want the money for? You must tell me."

There was no answer but the hysterical moaning began again. Alberta waited in silence for a moment, then she took Betty by the shoulders and shook her.

"Get hold of yourself," she commanded.

Finally it came, piece meal, garbled, attenuated, wrapped in ineffectual, puerile lies. From the muddle Alberta disentangled first half-truths, then the pitiable facts. There had been "bridge" debts all winter—nobody played anything but "slams" any more; clothes

cost such a lot; and there were traveling expenses and tips—servants were not nice unless you tipped them. Two weeks ago Mrs. Scarsdale, who kept the shop on the Lake Trail, had asked her to go in with her on a commission basis, one of her assistants had gone north. Betty had accepted and had been a sort of puller-in of customers. She paused. Now there was something wrong with the accounts, a mix-up about a vanity case. Mrs. Scarsdale had accused her of having sold it privately, when she had only taken it to the beach to show a prospective customer. It had got lost and Mrs. Scarsdale was threatening to have her arrested if she didn't pay to-morrow. "So I went to Cyril." A look of curiously low cunning besmirched the babyishness of Betty's face. "I knew he'd understand *anything*! He wouldn't give it to me! I've got an awful lot on Cyril and . . ."

"You mean you tried a little mild blackmail—said you'd tell Mollie?" Alberta's steady eyes held Betty's flickering gaze a moment.

"Well, what if I did?" She sat up defiantly and stopped crying. "He threw me over last year when—when anything might have happened. I could have made a fuss. He ought to be grateful to me—it's a debt of honor, and he makes excuses—he'd be afraid to give me money, afraid of what people would say if it

came out, afraid to start that sort of thing, as he calls it! A pity about him! If I can't get the money and Mrs. Scarsdale tells, it's all over with me, even here! Nobody'll invite me any more and then what shall I do? Since father's remarried, he and his wife haven't any room for me, and he's cut down my allowance. Mother's off on a cruise with the Blowers. Her alimony is just enough for her own clothes, anyway. Cynthia invited me to go to Paris with her in March, but that'll be all off! I'd have asked her for the money but I knew she'd tell her husband." She collapsed again, sobbing.

Alberta sat down on the bed. She laid her arm across Betty's knee, stroking it gently. "How much do you owe, Betty?" Her brows were drawn together.

"Three hundred and fifty," wailed Betty. "Isn't it ridiculous for that woman to make a row just over the price of one little vanity case?"

"I'll get you the money," said Alberta. Betty flung her arms around Alberta's neck. "But," Alberta rocked the girl softly to and fro, "you must make me a promise. You must leave Palm Beach and you must take a cure."

Betty's hold instantly loosened. "What cure, I should like to know?" she said defiantly, though she was still chattering.

"Aren't we down to the truth yet, Betty? You know very well what I mean. Listen to me. You'll go under, just as sure as . . . as death. I knew a man once . . . It's eating you up, all that's fine, good in you, and you don't need it. It's hardly a habit yet. I know the symptoms, you see. You began it for sensation, for a thrill, but it will get you. I've thought it all out. I have a friend who will find a sanitarium for you. I'll borrow the money for that part myself. No one need know. To-morrow I'll send you a fake telegram and you can leave as soon as we've settled with Mrs. Scarsdale. I've got some money I saved right here in a jewel case. I can borrow the rest. Tell me where your . . . your medicine is, dear, and I'll give you a dose to hold you for the night!"

"It's in the soda mint bottle in the bathroom," said Betty.

Alberta sat beside her till she fell asleep.

About eleven o'clock, before Betty was yet awake, Alberta paid the debt to Mrs. Scarsdale and got from her a signed statement that the money was in payment for a vanity case lost on the beach. She tucked the receipt in her pocket and turned back along the Lake Trail to seek the Marquise. Often in the last few weeks she had gone to her as to a reality amid so much sham. The years seemed to have stripped away non-

essentials. "You are like a rock set in quicksand," she had told her one day, confiding her perplexities.

The Marquise received her affectionately. She was lying on her *chaise-longue*, daintily wrapped in filmy black laces.

"One learns to veil the indignities that age puts upon one," she answered when Alberta remarked on the appropriate elegance of her *deshabillé*. "There is anxiety in your face; what is it, my dear? Is it Dick, or has our fantastic civilization confused you again?"

"I have come," said Alberta, "to borrow money for a good cause, but I would rather not tell you what it is. Can you trust me?"

"How much do you need, Alberta?" The glance of the Marquise was keen and straight. It held no flicker of mistrust of Alberta or desire to evade the doing of a favor.

"I want the price of a ticket North and two hundred dollars extra," said Alberta. "No, it's not for myself," she answered the anxiety of the Marquise's unspoken question. "I know it's a lot, but it's to avert a tragedy."

The Marquise rose a little stiffly from her couch (she dragged the decades with her when she moved) and walked to her desk.

"I have made it out for five hundred." She handed

Alberta the check. "You owe me neither confidences nor a return."

"I accept it as a wedding present," Alberta spoke with the dignity of truth. She folded the check and slipped it in her purse.

"And your wedding!" The Marquise relieved the anticlimax. "Your cards were extremely well done. Mollie tells me she has engaged the cinematograph photographers to take a moving picture of the ceremony. She wants me to be among the figurantes. I have declined. My increasing deafness has made me something of a fan, but I have no intention of rivaling Mary Pickford. And I hate to think, my dear, that your vows will not be sacred from publicity."

A little more than a week later, a letter from Jim informed Alberta that an excellent nursing home had been found for Betty and that her cure had begun.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR some days Mollie and Cyril, the Moxons, Phyllis and her following, which included the Dares, had been debating whether to "take in" the Braithmarte's "Silver Ball" at Miami. The Braithmarte's had a show place on Biscayne Bay which feverishly rivaled the Palm Beach palaces. It boasted fourteen bedrooms, each named after some famous courtesan, and furnished in the style of the period to which these daughters of joy had belonged. There was the "Diane de Poitiers," on whose ceiling the silver crescent intertwined with a golden "H" against the blue background; the "Ninon de Lenclos," rosy with pink taffeta and wreathing flowers; the "Pompadour," powder blue and silver; the "Maintenon," austere and dark and reserved for spinsters or elderly widows. The household was the last word of elaboration. A floor maid stood in the bedroom corridors to minister to any possible wishes of the guests. She thrust her services upon them with the invariable question, "Will madame lie down, write a letter, or take a bath?" If the reply to any of these suggestions was affirmative, she removed the elaborate cover from the

bed, placing the pillow at an angle hospitable for rest; or laid the paper and envelopes on the blotter, lifting the window shade to give more light; or turned on the bath, having first spread a richly embroidered and initialed mat before the tub. Many of the guests who lacked presence of mind and decision, found themselves spending most of their time in the bath. The reception rooms of this magnificent establishment were thoroughly in keeping with the bedrooms. The entrance hall resembled the Pennsylvania Station. Even the magnificent tapestries and a huge fireplace did not suffice to make intimate conversation possible around the elaborate tea table, dwarfed by the surroundings. The great dining-room was better. The pale citron satin that covered its walls was damasked in time-toned browns and greens, by the splendid straight lines of royal palms. Sir David Preen, the great Jewish art dealer, had brought it from France; it had been woven for Madame Grand, the famous West Indian beauty who became the wife of Talleyrand. One could not come to Florida and omit going to the Braithmarts, provided one got the chance. On this occasion they had a houseful of guests from the North, and had reserved extra rooms at the hotel for the Palm Beach contingent, who would presumably be there but one night.

"We'll have much more fun," said Phyllis to Cynthia, "being on our own at the hotel. Mollie and Polly as chaperons aren't very devastating, and it will also give my future sister-in-law a chance to see the house. By the way, Cynthia, I can't make that girl out at all. She's been on the stage, even sang in a cabaret, though the family are trying to keep that dark, why I don't know—it would make her a lot more interesting to feature it. She doesn't seem to have any pep. The other evening, for instance, we had a mad discussion on sex at Zuzu Johnson's dinner—Freud and that sort of thing. Zuzu's read Kraft Ebling, too, and—well, there wasn't much left out about the new-fashioned vices. Alberta did not say one word the whole time. You might have thought she didn't know anything about life. What are you going to wear to the Braithmartes'? Izzy Einstein has promised to lend me the crystal headdress from his last New York revue. He telegraphed for it last week."

The Prince and the Archduchess having signified a cordial acceptance of the Braithmartes' hospitality, those who had pleaded a previous engagement found themselves suddenly free and a fleet of motors left next day for Miami.

The Harvey party arrived at sunset. Phyllis and Alberta had adjoining rooms at the Royal Palm, and

Hortense unpacked her mistress's dressing case swiftly, disposing about the room the two or three photographs, the elaborate toilet set, the bits of real lace of her elegant equipment. Alberta had as yet none of these refinements of travel, and Hortense attended to her belongings summarily, with ill concealed scorn.

"One sees well that it is not a young girl of the world, even from the chemise—no embroideries by the hand, and a lace more than ordinary."

The two girls had already gone down to join the others on the open air dance floor for a turn before it should be time to dress. Gilt edged cards on the dressing tables at the hotel had informed them that the Braithmarts' closed motors would await them below at eight thirty. Dancing never tired Alberta. It was as natural as breathing; it seemed to simplify life, one fell into its rhythm. She floated round and round in the twilight with Dick; this world and its perplexities seemed to drop away. They were just two happy young things moving to the tune of the universe.

She dressed for the party with meticulous care. Her supple waist and soft swelling breast, a little fuller than that of most American girls, emerged, wrapped closely in shiny silver folds, from the white tulle of her skirt. On her shoulder she pinned a white camelia.

This year the Braithmartes had outdone themselves. Helen Braithmarte had given the occasion her best thought. No other hostess in Miami could possibly have secured the Prince. She decided that the fête should be *al fresco* with the magnificent house used **only** as an entrance, a *décor*.

Attired in a superb Venetian costume of white and silver brocade, she received her guests in the great hall. Alberta was greeted with flattering emphasis. The Prince had placed her name first on the list of those he wished to meet in her house.

"This is Miss Varley," she prompted her husband to a more observant attention. "The Prince . . ." The arrival of a fresh group of guests interrupted her.

Alberta and Dick passed out through one of the many long windows that left the whole side of the house open to the sea. A broad terrace lay before them. On either side of a flight of steps which led down to the water, stood two magnificent negroes, nude save for loin cloths and turbans of silver. Their flickering torches held aloft lighted the guests to a fleet of silvered gondolas lying moored below. Beyond, on the dark water of the bay lay a magnificent Spanish galleon, painted from prow to stern in silver, the sails silver, the masts silver, the ropes silver. A spot-light drenched it in artificial moonlight, leaving

the rest in shadow. Alberta gasped. Close beside her she heard the Prince.

"I came because of you," he said, slipping out from behind an urn. Drawing her hand through his arm he led her to the steps. The Shelton girl, as usual without a partner, had detained Dick for a moment. The others were exclaiming over the beauty of the scene.

As the gondoliers, in silver also and wearing azure sashes, propelled them out to the galleon, Alberta could see, looking back, the dark orange groves hung with silvered fruit, the whole crop of a season sacrificed to an evening's entertainment. Behind were taller trees draped thickly with glittering tinsel that drooped like Florida moss from the branches.

The Prince gazed avidly at Alberta, as he helped her out of the gondola.

On the deck the small tables, lighted by immense candelabra, were piled high with silvered fruit in bowls of crystal. A harp played music as thin and eerie as moonlight.

Alberta and the Prince leaned on the rail, watching in the flare of the torches the gondoliers ferrying the guests from the terrace. Suddenly the Prince turned to her. "Six years ago to-night I saw the headless body of my younger sister hurtled from a window of

the Palace. That she is a Saint in Heaven is the only certitude I have found in life."

The flickering glare from the shore lighted his face, revealing its structure; for a second she saw the real man behind the symbol.

Her hand sought his, simply, and the Prince did not misunderstand. "Then to you, for a different reason," she said, "all this must seem as unreal as it does to me."

He had let go her hand with only a friendly pressure.

"As untrue as if I had died with my sister and were looking back out of reality at shadows," he answered. "All my old life was unreal, too. When I drove out as a tiny child, seated in the high-swung landau next my Norland nurse and she held my hand to my fur cap in salute, they even changed the aspect of the streets for me. Men on horseback rode before me to clear the way. People curtsied along the sidewalk. Reality stopped to let me pass. That was the beginning. Symbols, symbols, always symbols! Then I was affianced to the ugliest of my two cousins—it was the young, pretty one I wanted to marry, of course, but there were not princes enough in Europe to go round and she had, perforce, to wait her turn. That was a symbol, too. Of what, I wonder? One of my children is deaf, another has a strange malady that defies diag-

nosis. In the old days we had our ermine in which to wrap our tragedies, our strawberry leaves to crown them, but now they are stripped stark. We dare not face them. We live only by forgetting. My wife is valiant. If we had loved each other, hardships would have drawn us closer. Now they separate us by their sordidness. She takes her satisfactions with her church, her priests, and I . . .”

The Prince broke off into a blank silence, but in a moment he began again. “And you Americans, free in that beautiful democracy of your earlier history, free to be natural, to live simply—not in the enforced simplicity of poverty endured, but a simplicity by preference! And you do this!” He made a gesture toward the tinseled forest on the shore. “This! Sell your birthright, tangle yourselves in elaborations and in lies and,” he laughed, “use us, a Prince and an Archduchess, as an advertisement for real estate or bait for your parties! And the reason I like *you*, Alberta Varley, is because there is reality in you.” His tone changed. “And I want that reality, Alberta, in Cintra!”

“Prince,” said Helen Braithmarte at his elbow.

“At your command,” answered Prince Waldemar, as he followed her to the great table in the center of the deck.

Dick, already seated, raised his glass to Alberta. He was flushed and heavy-eyed. She had seen him like that several times lately. She did not enjoy the heightened after-midnight gaiety that most people mistook for wit. Her own perceptions were never blurred. Presently he would be noisy and silly.

The ball ended just like any other ball, in the small hours of the morning. A breakfast of scrambled eggs and griddle cakes was served on the deck of the galleon for those who had remained until the end. When the splendid dawn, that had blazed its trail stealthily through the tropic night, fell on the faces of the Braithmartes' guests, the scene was as dilapidated as the *fantoques* of a Mardi Gras. It was the moment of disillusion, the unmasking of spirits as well as faces. But the revelations of the sunbeams were not necessary to add to the pain of disgust in Alberta's heart. Cyril had tried to kiss her in one of the gondolas where she had floated with him between dances; behind the sails of the galleon she had seen Cynthia and Dick, lip pressed to lip. She knew he would explain it away—the wine, the excitement. She would believe him, did believe him. The explanation was just what was damning. Here he was, too, playing the dangerous flippant game of mock passions. She could have respected anything that was real. But then, these people

were born to this puppet-like artificiality, she must remember.

She made no comment as they motored back to the hotel. Dick, heavy with sleep, sat in the tonneau; and Phyllis, gay as a lark, but more strident, chattered continuously. They all went to their rooms to get rid of the fatigue of the night, each in his own way.

At six o'clock that evening Alberta awoke. A note on the pin-cushion from Phyllis informed her that she had gone over to the beach for a supper and dance with the Moxons; that Dick was still sleeping off his jag, and that Cyril and Mollie had returned to Palm Beach. She added that they were planning to fly back via aeroplane next morning.

Alberta felt horribly lonely, lonely as she had never been before. She could have joined Phyllis at the beach as she suggested in the letter, but that would not help her, she knew. She must think it out herself, look it in the face. She decided to go for a walk.

The streets, filled with small shops, prosperous-looking marble banks, big department stores, rows of real-estate offices, models of houses in the windows, seemed to stretch endlessly in every direction. The town was so big she could not get beyond it, though she walked for an hour. As she was passing a corner on the outskirts, a large sign over the entrance to a sort

of open air theater attracted her attention—"Frivolity Flappers."

She paid her fifty cents to a young woman uncomfortably enclosed in a glass case, who looked quite able to face the world without that protection, and passed under the green painted wooden archway that spanned the entrance. There was a large garden within with rows of wooden benches, and enclosed on two sides by a whitewashed wall covered with a latticework design that made the place look like a real theater. Electric fans blew a disheveling gale over an audience which, even in the open, exuded a perfume of peanuts, perspiration and banana peel. Alberta dropped into a seat near the back; she had neglected to provide herself with a programme, but she did not care. She felt sunk, as Phyllis would have described it.

The jokes were vulgar, the dancing poor, the whole production tawdry and disgusting. She wondered what impulse had made her come in. Moreover, the whole thing only awakened painfully depressing memories. Granny's death, Darcy's failure, Victoria's defection. She was about to leave, when a small figure trotting up the aisle attracted her attention. It was that of a tiny child, a girl, not more than five years old. The evening was hot, and she wore a little white smock that slipped off at one shoulder. Her soft curls had the

whitish hue of spun glass. Her innocent babyishness seemed somehow to trail clouds of glory through this dull auditorium. Alberta thought instinctively of star dust and asphodels. In her arms she carried a paper bag from which protruded several bananas and the end of a ham sandwich. Making her way toward the stage, she took her seat on some steps at the side. She was evidently an habitu  . Alberta was interested. The black-faced comedian had danced his way into the wings. A team was coming on.

Alberta glanced up casually—her attention had been centered on the child. Then her breath stopped. She stooped hastily and picked up a programme that some one had let fall under the bench in front of her. "Wandine and Bud Lasalle in their famous impersonations." She got up and moved forward two or three benches. She knew she could not be mistaken. Her heart beat so wildly she could scarcely see them, yet there they were, Victoria and Bert Barstow, older, shabbier and bearing the unmistakable imprint of failure. Bert had still something of his old superficial smartness, but his face was lined. She recognized his little slits of eyes and the over-wide mouth that might have been merry had not dope and drink made him the unpleasant degenerate that he was. Poor Bert was a hideous burlesque of his own possibilities. Alberta had seen it all at a

glance, but her gaze focused on Victoria: Victoria, the pretty bloneness blurred and coarsened, the fine outlines of her face bloated and lost, until she looked like a bad water-color drawing; Victoria, her voice strident and hard, a mere feeder for Bert's coarse jokes and indecent allusions. Alberta hid her face in her hands.

A wave of longing, of pity and affection swept over her. She got up hurriedly and followed the child who had started to mount the flight of steps laboriously.

"Well, for the lord's sake," screamed Victoria, turning on the stool in the dirty little dressing-room, and kicking off her slippers. "I'll tell the world it's about time I heard from my sister! Nice sort of a girl you are! By your get-up I'd say you were on the upgrade." She looked appraisingly at Alberta. "Just because you were sore that I left you in Jacksonville was no reason for you never to write."

"But I *did* write," said Alberta. She had put her arms around Victoria, and was kissing her, her eyes full of tears. It was Darcy's fault again, of course. He had not posted her letters to Victoria or the others. She saw it now with certainty. He had wilfully cut her off from everybody.

"Mama," the little girl held up the paper bag to Victoria.

"Hello, Snookie! Hello, Alberta." Bert, from the background, was casual as ever. He drew two wooden chairs away from the make-up table and offered one to his sister-in-law. Sitting down himself on the other, he took Snookie on his knee. Victoria was still sulking.

"It's a hell of a family party," said Bert, "but there's no use heaving bricks." He began peeling a banana for Snookie. "My youngest unmarried heiress here looks down and out. She's a cute little flapper all right." He kissed the child's soft cheek tenderly. His shabby clothes were held smartly across his hollow chest by the one button of fashion, and Alberta noticed that his necktie—Bert's taste in neckties had always been superlative—was as smartly knotted as if it had not been frayed and faded. His prison-like pallor, however, was more pronounced than of old, and a nervous twitch distorted his left eye. Yet as he held the baby figure close in the curve of his drooped shoulder Alberta had never liked him half so well. Who could have guessed that Bert was paternal?

"Look out, Bert, she's smearing the front of your vest with the banana skin. But you should worry, of course. I'm the original Carbona Kid. Naphtha's as natural to me as water, and I can always pay for getting your other suit out of hock with my salary, while

you lose your money on the horses, or do the sob stuff over Snookie. Why didn't you star in *King Lear* anyhow, instead of going into vaudeville? He's one awful mess, Alberta," she turned to her sister. "I'll tell the world he is. But I'm crazy mad about him yet. Guess I always will be. What do they call the thing—a complex or something? Well, I got a Bert-complex, and it would take chloroform enough to kill, to cut it out. Have a sandwich?" She held out Snookie's bag to Alberta, having first extracted a doughnut for herself. "What's the dope about yourself? Married or single, or a little of both?"

She was the same old Victoria. There was something pathetically valiant in her assumption of gaiety. Alberta could guess at the history; the Winter Garden had never materialized, and Bert, despite his real talent as a comedian, had failed through his lack of structural strength and solidity. Victoria's dress, hanging on a peg, was of the sleaziest cheap silk, and Snookie's toe stuck out through her worn red shoe.

"I've been visiting the Carlions at Palm Beach," Alberta said, answering her sister's question.

"Didn't I tell you to tie up to that bunch?" commented Victoria. "What did you do in the meantime?"

Alberta rehearsed her invariable story, scumbling

where she could and leaving out Darcy. "And now I'm engaged to Dick Harvey," she said winding up her recital.

"Not a son of *the* Mrs. Richard Harvey—the multi-millionaire that gives those orgies at Palm Beach?" Victoria evidently read the papers. Her astonishment checked for the moment her realization of the discrepancies in Alberta's recital. "I saw where she had gold faucets on her bathtubs and real diamonds in the heels of her dancing slippers. You aren't stringing us?"

"No," said Alberta, "I really am engaged to Dick."

"Well, if that isn't the cat's whiskers!" Victoria gasped. "Sorry we can't stay and meet hubby. The show moves on to-morrow. Poor relations are in the road, anyway, I guess. When'll you get married?"

"I don't know, soon I suppose. I've had quite a lot to bother me the last few days, but as soon as I get things straightened out in my mind . . . "

"Don't let your young man get away from you, whatever you do; don't flirt with your luck," cried Victoria. "Why, he isn't even a Jew or a daddy! It's more than a girl has a right to expect."

Alberta got up. She wanted to get away from further questioning and to think out the new features of the situation that her meeting with Victoria presented.

"I must see you again, Victoria," she said. "Perhaps afterward, I could help you, you know, about Snookie or something. Can't you manage to come to the hotel early to-morrow morning?" She scribbled her room number on the corner of a programme with a gold pencil from the hand-bag Dick had given her.

"Sure, we'll drop in to-morrow if we can manage it." Victoria's manner was without eagerness, indifferent even, but there was the flicker of an undercurrent of thought in her eyes. "So long, then!" She turned toward the dressing table.

When Alberta got back to the hotel, she found a note from Dick lying on top of a florist's box, informing her that he was quite fit again, and having looked for her in vain, had gone over to the beach casino to join the others. He added that the lobster had given him a touch of ptomaine, and that the starting hour for Palm Beach would be at ten next morning, weather permitting. Alberta tossed the whole night through. The images of the evening and the night before, so contrasted, and yet both so perplexing, crossed and re-crossed her mind without continuity, in the hopeless tangle of a nightmare.

Whichever way she looked was disappointment and disillusion. On the one hand, the old life represented by Victoria at its most sordid and unsuccessful; on the

other, the new life reached through Dick at its most foolish and irresponsible.

Finally she fell asleep, and dreamed that she was drowning in a dark ocean with Victoria. Beneath the waves she could see Snookie's face, and in a silver gondola above her, Dick was kissing another woman.

The glare of the hot morning sun awakened her. There was a little dressing-room beyond her bedroom; the Braithmartes had "done" their guests rather well. As reality gradually reconstituted itself in Alberta's mind, her glance was attracted by something which seemed to be moving on the sofa. At first she thought she must be dazzled, or dizzy; then she sprang out of bed. There on the couch, her little smock pulled away from one shoulder, her curly head resting on her curved, dimpled arm, lay Snookie. She stirred softly in her sleep. Something rustled and fell to the floor. It was a paper. Alberta recognized the florid handwriting of Victoria.

"Dear Alberta, I'm leaving you Snookie. She's got no future with us, not with Bert the way he is; and I could never leave him. I guess I'm more wife than mother, anyway—or else perhaps Bert's like my child. He's crazy about Snooks. I shall tell him you wanted her for a few weeks—that I thought the change in food would do her good—but, Alberta [here the words

were heavily underlined], *you must keep her*. You said you wanted to do something for me. Do *that*. We'll look after ourselves. I won't butt into your life. But you can give Snookie a chance. I *do* want sweetheart to get her chance. She's some little dancer already, but God knows I don't wish her to go on the stage. I'm going to change our team name so as to take no chances on your finding us, and it'll be a whole lot better for Snookie, too. A 'pipe' or two more will make it all right to Bert about Snookie. Funny about everything, isn't it? It's a great life if you haven't got knock-knees. Love, VICTORIA.

"P. S. Snook's dresses are all so torn, I only put in the pink georgette and the china silk with the blue ruffles.

"P. P. S. She can't digest milk but you can feed her most anything else, from hot dogs to gorgonzola. Send us a post-card, General Delivery, New York City, how she is as soon as you can."

For a moment Alberta stood aghast. Then suddenly a great rush of joy swept over her. Here, here at last was the answer. After all life had not reached her, even though she could not have a child of her own. It would be something for her and for Dick to live for, to plan for. Their chance at immortality, of renewing youth when they themselves grew older. Snookie would help solve all problems; adorable Snookie—curls, skin, dimples, all that a baby should

be. She fell on her knees beside the sofa. Her action awakened Snookie. Her heavy lids opened lazily. She lifted her flushed cheek from her curved arm. Then her gaze widened. There were fright and anguish in the limpid blue depths. Her lips trembled pathetically. "Daddy! Daddy! Mummy! Mummy!" she wailed.

Alberta was terrified. "Hush, Snookie. I'm your Aunt Alberta. Daddy and Mummy have left you for a visit with me. Don't be frightened, darling."

But Snookie's cherub face was now distorted with convulsions of grief. Alberta grabbed a dressing gown from the nearest chair, and gathering Snookie in her arms made for the telephone. She thought the idea of food might pacify Snookie. Her appetite for bananas had impressed her.

"Snookie shall order her own breakfast," she said. "A nice breakfast, with bananas and lots of bread and maple sirup."

But Snookie failed to respond to these blandishments. She lay rigid and screaming in Alberta's arms. Alberta looked about her desperately for something to amuse her.

"What on earth has happened?" cried Phyllis from the doorway. Snookie's screams had awakened her. "What a dreadful brat—wherever . . . ?"

Snookie's cries had gradually become automatic, she was now yelling tearlessly with her mouth open. She

stopped for a moment to stare at Phyllis, but became deafeningly vocal again, almost immediately. Meanwhile Alberta was explaining. She found it more difficult, somehow, than she had anticipated. Especially as she noticed a curiously suspicious look in Phyllis's eyes. When she came to the part about keeping Snookie, Phyllis was already getting Dick's room on the telephone. He came at once, and burst into loud laughter at the sight of Alberta endeavoring unsuccessfully to make Snookie sit on her lap instead of lying like a stiff board across her knees. The child had begun to cry again; tears seemed to stream from eyes, nose and mouth at once.

"The little devil's got a temper of its own—what's it all about anyway?" said Dick.

"Alberta's gone completely mad," said Phyllis.

The coldness of her tone dismayed Alberta. It was all so unfortunate, the screaming child, and the way Phyllis had taken it. Now she must begin over again—tell Dick. She bungled it badly. It scarcely sounded like the truth. If she could only have paved the way, or if he could first have seen how lovely Snookie really was. Having sobbed herself into exhaustion, the child now clung around Alberta's neck, her face averted. Alberta handed him Victoria's letter. He read it through without comment.

"A damned mess she's put us in all right," he said

at last. "But of course she can't get away with it. We'll run them down somewhere."

"But I want to keep Snookie!" cried Alberta.

Looking down at her, Dick perceived for the first time that she was in her dressing-gown. One bare white foot was stuck into a pink mule, her hair curled riotously in thick tendrils round her face. The child's blonde head against her own made her more alluring. It was a lovely arabesque of nature's major intention.

Dick did not reason, but his atrophied soul stirred within him. He could refuse her nothing. Even Snookie was included in his embrace. "We'll fix it up somehow," he said. "We'll all get together back in Palm Beach." He saw that she was trembling, on the verge of collapse; her lips were shaking. He didn't share Phyllis's doubt, of course, but she couldn't be allowed to do anything so preposterous as to keep Snookie permanently.

"Come on!" he cried. "You girls get packed up, have your breakfast, and we'll wrap up the papoose and fly back at once."

What else could he do, he reasoned? If they attempted to leave the child here the papers would cook up some damned story. Why did beautiful girls have to have relations? Mollie and Cyril would have to help him out somehow.

They landed at Mollie's private dock. Snookie, tired out, had slept all the way.

"Made it in forty-eight minutes," said Dick, taking off his aviator's helmet. The fresh air had made him optimistic. He was inclined to look upon the thing as a joke. Alberta wouldn't let him carry Snookie, who, completely covered by the traveling rug, looked like a big package in her arms. It was the morning cocktail hour. Susan Carlion, Mollie and Cyril were assembled in the patio at Villa Miraciel. The Marquise, her face in shadow and her feet in the sun, sat in a wicker bergère in the corner.

"Hello, Alberta," said Cyril. "What's in the package—Bacardi or Veuve Cliquot?"

"It . . . it's a baby!" said Alberta. She put back the shawl and sat down quickly on the nearest chair.

Snookie, still sleepy, looked out hazily at a yellow butterfly that was perched on a hibiscus near at hand, and dozed off again.

Surprise and perplexity were painted on each face in the group, though their reactions to the phenomenon of Alberta's arrival with a baby was in each instance different. Suspicion lurked in all but one of them. There was an embarrassing pause.

"Since we are all among friends," said Dick airily, "Alberta might as well get it over and done with and

tell you about the mess her sister's got us into. Of course none of you will mention the matter outside." He glanced toward Susan.

When Alberta had finished there was complete silence for a moment. As the prospective head of the family, Cyril was the first to break it.

"The main thing to do is to avoid . . ."

"Avoid what?" Alberta looked up at him.

"Complications," answered Cyril, hesitating. She thought of his hot kisses in the gondola, and of what Betty had told.

"I mean to keep her!" she said, looking at him scornfully.

Mollie was clinging to him, sobbing hysterically into an initialed handkerchief extracted from his pocket.

"But surely, Alberta," said Mrs. Carlion, "you can't expect Dick, Mollie, any of us, to consider such a preposterous solution. You are under no obligations whatever to the child, or to your sister. I remember quite well that she was a vulgar young woman. After all, you admit that she left you alone in Jacksonville. When you are more reasonable . . ."

"I shall never be more reasonable, because it's our chance." Alberta stood up. She was holding Snookie like a shield across her breast. "Let me go inside and lay her down for a second." She was back in a moment.

No one had spoken. "It's my only chance for a child." She continued. "When I lost my own baby, I didn't ever . . ."

If a charge of T. N. T. had exploded in the sunny patio of Villa Miraciel its effect would scarcely have been more startling.

"Your baby! You were married? Then you've lied to us, lied to us all along!" Mollie came out of her handkerchief and her hysteria, her cheeks flaming, her fists clenched.

"I was never married," said Alberta slowly. It must be that Dick had not told them. She felt as if she were standing stripped naked in the open court, but she went on, speaking hurriedly and looking down. "The man turned out to be a bigamist—his name was Darcy, Paul Darcy. Mrs. Carlion knew him. He left me in Milan. I had a child born dead. I never saw it, I was too ill."

"You dreadful, dreadful girl," screamed Mollie. "You've deceived us all and lied to Dicky, poor, poor Dicky."

Dick was kneeling beside Alberta now. He sprang up. "Shut up, mother, or you'll be sorry for it. Alberta didn't lie to you or to me or to anybody. She made me promise to tell. She thought all along that you knew. It was nobody's business but mine, and I

wanted to save all this damned discussion and fuss. And there's not one of you—no, not one—that's fit to hold a candle to her. Look at Phyllis, with her petting parties. Yes, my dear, I saw you out in the Garden of Eden in a wheeled chair, only last week. And you, mother, pretending . . . And me . . . God, but we're rotten, every one of us."

He was facing them all now, his head in the air, the sun shining into his clear, blue, flaming eyes. "And we'll keep the baby," he cried.

A voice, a trifle deep, the voice of age, came from the bergère. It had in it a note of joyous triumph. "Dick, Dick, among all these naughty children, you only have attained your majority," said the Marquise de Hautcoeur.

Dick did not hear her. He had just perceived that Alberta had vanished into the house and was running madly across the court to find her.

"I'll have her out of the house before evening," Mollie chattered with rage. "Of course the whole thing's a pure invention. I don't believe a word of it. The child is her child and . . ."

"Hush, Mollie," Cyril laid his hand on her arm. "Let's consider the thing reasonably. What difference does it make even if it is her child? She's excited now, but it's going to be quite easy to persuade her to give

the baby up. She will understand that she must. The wife of the head gardener at Newport would be glad to take it. She has seven already. No one would ever know. We could bribe the woman not to talk."

"But ~~we~~ know," wailed Mollie, crying again.

"Carlion always maintained that she was perfectly respectable," interjected Susan, anxious to defend her own position in the situation. "Men can usually judge," she added.

Cyril looked at her gratefully. The invitations for the double wedding had been sent out weeks. He foresaw complications, dangerous postponements. Perhaps, even, on Mollie's part an awakened sense of responsibility for the disconsolate Dick if she succeeded in breaking up the affair, or a disorganizing nervous reaction if he insisted on going through without approval.

The Marquise, silent in her corner, was listening. "Fatality is not speaking through their little mouths," she commented mentally. Aloud she said, "In spite of your planning, it is Dick and the girl who will decide."

"Alberta's made a tremendous hit in Palm Beach," went on Cyril. He did not agree with the Marquise that the matter should be left to chance. "The Prince told me only yesterday that he wanted us to visit him this summer at his estate in Cintra. No one else has

been invited in all Palm Beach, and if you ask me, it's due to Alberta. Of course he is going to include you and Mr. Carlion." He turned toward Susan. Cyril's powers really merited a larger opportunity.

"Perhaps you ought to think it over, Mollie," suggested Susan. She did not wish to swing too quickly in the direction of Cyril's plans, but Cintra and royalty tempted her.

Half an hour later Mollie had been persuaded to reconsider, and Cyril went to fetch Alberta. She came into the courtyard quietly, accompanied by Dick, who was deadly pale. Mollie said all that she had to say. She had misunderstood, she would overlook, and they would take things up where they had left off.

When she had finished Alberta spoke calmly. "I can't stay now, I could never stay, no matter what you said or did. I should never have come. You are not my people, I don't belong here. You telegraphed. I can see it now, because you were afraid to refuse Dick his toy, and then when the Prince and other people thought me pretty and you found I was a success, you didn't inquire for the truth of me, nor want it. You didn't care. When at last it was forced on you the truth was too strong for you and you would not consent to the only real thing that I have done since I've been here, keeping Snookie."

"We can arrange all about Snookie," said Cyril soothingly. "It will come right in the end, the way you want it."

"No, Cyril, it would never come right. It's on a false basis. I don't love Dick, though I like him dearly, dearly." She took his hand in hers with an affectionate gesture. "But it's you, the others, the life, the whole thing. I don't want it ever. It was a temptation. I had wished all my life to be among nice people, ladies and gentlemen, but . . . " she hesitated.

"After I got here they weren't here, the ladies and gentlemen—only a few, I mean, like the Marquise and Mr. Carlion. I'm sorry, but I'm telling the exact truth now. And you wouldn't have minded if I had flirted and drunk and kissed other women's husbands, just to amuse myself or them. That wouldn't have been reality, and reality is the only thing you are afraid of. I could not live among you ever again. I loved the beauty and luxury, and your being so good to me went to my head and I kept on, knowing all the time—well, that the shrines were empty. So I am going away with Snookie this very night. I've got the money, some Mr. Carlion gave me years ago for posing. 'A ransom from life,' he called it."

"But where will you go?" asked Dick in agony.

"I don't know, Dick," answered Alberta.

Then, across the court stalked Fate, dressed in the livery of Mollie Harvey's head footman. On a silver tray he carried a telegram. "Your man brought it down from the house, Madame, he thought it might be important." He paused before Mrs. Carlion.

Susan opened the yellow envelope casually. The tensivity of the situation was broken for a moment by the mere familiar detail of a telegram. Meanwhile, Cyril, undiscouraged, had begun his plausible persuasions over again. Women seldom resisted him. He would see Alberta alone, he reflected.

"Oh," cried Susan, rising suddenly, "it's from James—an accident. Some chemicals exploded, it says. I wonder just how serious. . . . Poor boy, he's so clumsy. . . . There's my housewarming to-morrow night. It's so awkward. Perhaps I could go the day after. Cyril, can you get Long Distance, do you suppose?"

The telegram slipped to the floor as she rose.

Alberta, stooping to pick it up, turned ghastly pale. "Jim! Jim!" She thrust the telegram in her dress.

"Jim! Jim!" She looked at these people now as if they were the inhabitants of another planet. Jim ill, and Susan hesitating! Why, the telegram said—Love, what did they know of it, any of them! She got up quickly.

"I knew that I was going," she cried, "when I came down-stairs, but I did not know where. Now I do know," she touched her dress. "I'm going to Jim." Her little dark head was raised toward the sky. "Now, and a thousand years from now," she whispered under her breath, but they did not hear her.

The Marquise, crossing herself, pronounced the epilogue. "She does not need us," she said. "Alberta has herself and God."

"Of course she was a gold digger, after all. I make it four spades!" said Mrs. Gordon Smith, seated at the bridge table of a Long Island country home a few months later.

The announcement of Alberta's marriage to James Dunscombe had appeared in the papers that morning. For the last fortnight fantastic stories about Alberta had been circulating like wild-fire; she was a bigamist; she had been four times married, once to a Russian spy; she had had three illegitimate children.

"Double!" cried Tom Andrews savagely. He had been forced by his hostess to take a hand against his will.

"You see, she found out that Carlion's stepson was rich in his own right," commented Mrs. Shelton, "and so she left poor Dick flat. She's horribly ambitious.

socially of course. Look at the way she ran after the Prince."

Tom Andrews, put down his cards, and leaned toward the speaker.

"Did you happen to know," he said simply, "that James Dunscombe is blind?"

THE END





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EMPTY SHRINES

ELISABETH
FINLEY
THOMAS

